The Song of the Bird

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The Song of the Bird

by JodyJuliana

Summary

Will is an exiled prince and descendant of the gods, who for some time lived with a sorcerer who fed him human meat. Now he wanders alone through the forests, intending to find Hannibal's ancestral home in order to learn the truth about him and understand the motives behind everything he has done. One day on his journey he encounters a young man who wants to be his companion. Now they head north together, gradually getting closer to each other. Now the real question is, are the gods really on their side?

Notes

so. I've actually already finished this story in my native language, so all I need is to translate it, therefore chapters will be regular, don't worry. I hope you will like it, and if so, tell me what you think in comments! reading them makes my day better every time heh

Chapter 1

Like every day before, Will got up at first light, washed his face and hands with the stream water he had saved earlier, and then took his bow and arrows and went out to find something to eat - he had not been able to do that during the previous evening, and it had been a long time since he had seen a river with fish in it, so he was hungry. He wasn't a great archer, preferring to use a knife, but in hunting that weapon could rarely really help him, so he lurked in the bushes and waited for his prey. Two arrows fly past, but one still hits a large bird, strangely frozen on a stump, looking like an unusually easy prey. The man picks it up and carries it closer to his place to clean its feathers and cook it, when suddenly he hears a noise nearby and stops to listen.

His intuition immediately tells him that it is bandits who have caught another poor man who has wandered that deep into the forest for some reason. Perhaps he had gotten lost while gathering food, or had fallen behind his friends while hunting, or was trying to find the home of a witch who, according to the legend, lived somewhere deep in the forest. Will had never met a witch in all these years, but he knew which house caused all those rumors. He moved as far away from that house as he could and felt pity for every sufferer he encountered that asked him which way to go to find it.

Hannibal had indeed sometimes, if he liked his guest, provided assistance with his magic, but even then his methods were frightening. He could help kill someone with magic, poison, or a curse, but to get the necessary power for any of his favors you had to have a meal with him at the same table. The meal was usually made of less fortunate travelers who came to the sorcerer's disfavor - for one reason or another. The meat was indeed magical and empowering, but only those who could honorably tolerate the realization of what had been on their tongues a few minutes before they were told about it could escape the cannibal's house. During the time Will had lived there, he had not seen many of those people - three, to be exact, and not counting him.

The first was Dimmond, a young man who, for some unknown reason (at least for Will), had caught Hannibal's fancy despite some of his brashness and self-assurance; he was from a distant land, a bastard, and had sought the warlock's help in a coup d'état. When they finished their meal and he was told the secret about the meat he had been chewing calmly just a few moments ago and praised the host for his culinary skills, he didn't even flinch, only raised his eyebrows in slight surprise and smiled, noting that it was somewhat unusual, but he never mind widening his taste palette, and then hinted that he wouldn't mind sharing more than just a meal with the men at the table. Will was almost certain that Lecter would kill the strange bastard for such a proposal, but he only smiled cheerfully as he crossed his eyes with Will's, and only after reading something in his face did reply in the same Aesopian language that it was not going to happen. He seemed to refuse only because Will was not ready for such a thing; Dimmond, however, did not look too disappointed, but sighed: "what a shame," and sent another piece of meat into his mouth.

It seems that he eventually became the right hand of the new ruler, and now that kingdom became something like a monarchy with a powerful parliament, where he gradually won the

hearts of those around him, keeping from them that he had actually once eaten someone's heart.

Alana and Margot, who came together and asked for help in getting rid of the cruel tyrant, the brother of one of the girls, clearly felt the horror of what had happened, but valued each other and the potential chance for freedom too much to let the powerful sorcerer see it, and because of that they left his house and, if Will can afford the luxury of believing rumors, now rule together in the Verger's kingdom. Only they themselves, Hannibal, and him, were aware of their secret. Abigail used to know it as well, but she took that with her to her grave. The man feels a tugging pain in his chest at the mere memory of the poor girl's name.

Will wasn't the kind of man who thought about whether or not to help people in trouble, so now he shook off his thoughts and drew his knife and crept toward the tree, peering cautiously out from behind it and assessing the situation. There are only three bandits, one of them standing off to the side, silently watching and holding a sword that was obviously stolen from a member of the royal guard he had once encountered. He looks relaxed and slightly amused, so Will thinks it should be easy enough to deal with him. The other two, on the other hand, were pinning some young man, who was hard to see behind their backs, against a tree trunk. One seemed to be threatening him with a knife as the poor man tried to beg for a chance of life, and the other was going through his pockets. Suddenly, as if finding or noticing something, they both tense up, and the latter grasps the knife, also holding it out to the young man. They ask him something in their language, and he answers them louder now, feeling panic.

The next moment, one of the bandits steps aside to grab a rope, and Will decides it's time. He distracts them with a whistle and gets closer to one of the men and slits his throat from the back, throwing his body aside, leaving him to bleed to death. The two draw their weapons, forgetting about the young man, only pushing his face into the ground to keep him out of the way, and Graham puts the knife in his other hand, drawing his sword as well. He's done this so many times that the blood on his face doesn't even feel like burning lava anymore - more like a light morning dew.

They're bad, he repeats mentally, soothing himself, finding comfort in that. *They hurt people*. What he's doing is *just. It's not the way Hannibal does it.* They're *different.*

It absolutely doesn't feel that way when he finishes off one of the brigands, snapping his neck before tossing his body towards the thorn bushes.

Will looks over the bloody bodies and puts his sword away with a distinctive sound, breathing heavily after the fight. He finally stops his attention on the dark-haired young man still sitting on the ground near the tree. He has a fresh cut on his chin, and blood runs down his neck, staining his green collar. Will gives him a hand to help him up, like the noble knight he didn't think he was. The stranger looks at the outstretched palm and suddenly his pupils dilate, almost filling the light green iris completely. The young man flinches, before raising his gaze to his face again with his mouth ajar. "Grahamson..." he whispers in surprised awe, and Will presses his lips together, feeling tense at the realization that he has been recognized. The stranger says something in a language Will doesn't know, burning with admiration, and then bows to him, putting a hand to his chest and lowering his head respectfully.

"No. That's enough, get up," he says a little irritably, and then decides to help him up himself, and the young man obeys him, looking up again.

"You are William, the banished prince" the stranger says already in calorian with an accent, and it finally comes to the man's attention how his identity has been revealed. He looks at his palm, bearing the cross-shaped scar left on it made by his father on his fourteenth birthday - a tradition, a symbol of keeping loyalty to the kingdom, of spilling his own blood before any of his subjects spill theirs in another war. The cut was made with a blade of a special metal, and the scar remained visible for a lifetime, a reminder of the oath to the one who bore it. Will had once been in awe of this tradition, and had spent hours looking at the scar, thinking about how he would greet his subjects with a raised palm one day, but now it seemed almost ridiculous and just inconvenient in his current position, like wearing a nameplate on his chest. Even a stranger speaking another language recognized him at one glance at that stupid scar.

"Since you know who I am, you surely realize there is no need to kneel" Will remarks a little rudely when he notices the stranger about to bow to him again. The young man smiles awkwardly as he looks into his face, and Grahamson sighs with a dose of weariness. "You're not hurt? What are you doing in the woods?"

He thinks about the fact that maybe this man isn't so good at his language already after saying this, but before he can even begin to try to explain the question in any other way, the wanderer gives him an answer, pursing his lips and lowering his gaze, touching his leg. Will notices the blood and the torn pant leg and the fact that he is unsteady on the ground. It's unlikely that it's anything really serious, but without healing he could be in for a festering wound or some other infection, followed by death. The prince contemplates having to carry him to his temporary camp, where some of his supplies remain, including potions he learned to make when he was Hannibal's apprentice. They could help the wound heal faster and avoid worsening. It could save his life.

"Doesn't look too serious" Will looks around, noticing the things the bandits have managed to take from the young man and probably many poor travelers before him. "I'll collect the stuff from the bodies and take you to my place, I have something that will help with your wound" he says, leaving the stranger standing by the tree while he himself leans over to one of the corpses, searching it and putting everything in his bag, to the cloth wrapped dead bird he is now even more eager to eat for his breakfast, after the adrenaline of the fight has subsided.

He takes the sword so he can have a spare or maybe sell it later. Might as well get rid of the emblem on the hilt to arouse less suspicion, the man ponders somewhat aloofly.

"What's your name, ophelian?" Will asks, taking what appears to be an item taken from the young man - a musical instrument that reminded him of a lyre. It has a sloppy engraved words in a language he recognizes as ophelian - hence his assumption of the man’s nationality.

"Matthew" the young man says, smiling slightly, as if pleasantly surprised at the recognition. "Matthew Brown, your highness."

Will wrinkles his nose. "Stop it. I am not your highness" he gets up from the ground and holds out a lyre to the young man. "Call me Will. All right? Let's go".

"Will" Matthew repeats, feeling awe in his chest, and breaks out into a smile. The wound in his leg seems completely insignificant against everything he feels as he looks at Grahamson. He lowers his gaze to his elbow, which he offers, and Brown takes the hint, gratefully taking it to tread more confidently on the ground. "Thank you, Will," the young man exhales. He suddenly remembers the question Will asked him a couple minutes ago, and decides to answer after all. "I'm an exile, just like you. Well," he grins awkwardly, "not royal one. Sorry," Matthew adds, having already realized that the prince doesn't like reminders of his close ties to the crown.

Will really doesn't like it. It had been quite a few years, but not long enough for the old wounds to stop bleeding, for his palm to stop spasming at every reminder of the past, of his family, of the palace from which he'd been dishonorably banished. He had no doubt that the story of what had happened had spread throughout the kingdoms - it was too terrible and shocking to fade into oblivion so soon, or ever, as long as the memory of his kind lived on in the minds of thousands.

He had killed a man, one of the distinguished Hobbs family, who came from a neighboring kingdom on a diplomatic visit. He should have been executed for such a thing, or imprisoned, but his father had decided to send the brat into exile, forbidding him to return to the kingdom. He could have tried to find a home in the other palaces, which is probably what everyone expected him to do, but instead Will headed into the forest, staying there until nightfall, building a trap for the Hobbs carriage that passed later, to take Abigail, the daughter of the man he had killed. He had promised to save her from her family, promised as he wrapped his bloody arms around her, ridding her of the man who had done terrible things to her and poisoned her life. He'd promised, and he couldn't just leave her alone, not after he'd heard her trembling voice begging not to give her back home, not after he'd made a vow to her that turned out to be more important to him than the scar of the cross on his palm.

They ran away together, wandering without purpose through the woods. He told her stories unrelated to the palace – about hunting, fishing. He taught her everything, replacing either her father or her older brothers; the girl was mostly quiet, but soon she warmed to him, moving away from the events that had happened, and they fished together. She also turned out to his surprise to be a capable archer, much better than himself, and learned things quickly. She was amazing.

One day she had been wounded by bandits and had almost died, but a mysterious man, unknown to him at the time, had appeared nearby and saved her, treating her wound and giving her potions, and then kindly taking her and Will to his home to rest and recover from their long and arduous journey. Grahamson had planned and repeatedly said that they would leave when Abigail was well, and that he was grateful to the man who had introduced himself as Hannibal, and that he was willing to pay for his kindness in gold, of which he actually had little, only what his father had given him before he was sent away from the palace. Lecter had smiled hospitably in return, and he'd ducked the subject, asking more about Will, who'd kept quiet about his past as long as Hannibal had let him. It wasn't until after a couple weeks of quiet chuckles at his attempts to hide the truth that Lecter had finally blurted out during the conversation over dinner that he knew about who Will was. Grahamson offered to clear the table himself this time, and then Hannibal stopped him with a gesture before taking one of his palms in his own, "well how can I force your highness to do such a boring chore?" and his

voice was mocking and his smile was light and Will blushed and pulled his hands from his, standing up with his plate and heading for the sink. A chuckle sounded behind his back then, and they didn't speak again until Abigail was asleep. Only then, sitting on the porch, did they talk through everything that had been inside Will all this time, gnawing at him with torments of conscience and fears, and didn't go to bed until dawn. The man could still feel the warmth of Hannibal's hands on his cheek as he gently touched him, looking into his eyes. The moment he promised to take care of him and Abigail. To keep them safe as his family.

He'd fallen like a fool before his tenderness and sweet speeches, and couldn't leave even when he learned the whole truth. Only Abigail's death had changed everything, opened his eyes to what Lecter was, how he'd lied to him.

The dull ache in his chest made him grimace and he tried to distract himself from the memories with talking since he had a company now. "What were you banished for?" he asks, pushing back the branches of the bushes with his hand.

Matthew bites his lip, remaining quiet for a while, as if contemplating whether or not he should tell the whole truth, but eventually he still sighs almost doomedly. "They… found out who I was. They didn't like who I was" he replies a little vaguely. Though he spoke well in a language foreign to him, some of the phrases sounded a bit clumsy, as if the truth required him to say words he wasn't entirely sure of.

Will frowns, but they are already coming out to where he had set up camp, so he decides to sit the young man down on a fallen tree near an extinguished fire first before continuing to question him. Matthew stretches out his leg with a sigh, wrinkling his nose when the prince touches the wound, examining it through the hole in his pants. "Here," he says, placing all things beside him, then taking a vial of blue potion from his small stash, bringing it to Brown's lips. "Drink it. It'll help you get back on your feet faster" Will tilts the open vial, generously letting Matthew drink half of it before closing the potion and putting it back away, taking out another to wash the wound and treat it. Brown hisses through his teeth, clutching the wood beneath his hands, but tolerates it well enough, only swearing once in his language. "That's all. The wound will heal within twenty-four hours, soon you won't be limping at all" he says, taking some kind of ointment and then moving closer to Matthew's face, running his thumb over the scar, and Brown squints. "The scar will probably stay. But at least it won't get infected or anything" Will comments before pulling away and finally sitting down too, opening his bag.

He lays out the items he took from the bandits - mostly jewelry that he can sell when he gets to town or trade for something. There also happens to be a folding knife in there, which would be handy for cleaning fish or cutting food in general. The thought of it whets his appetite, and he takes the cloth-wrapped large bird, unwrapping it.

"Are you hungry? I'll make breakfast," he says, looking up at Matthew and seeing his eyes rounded almost in horror and his mouth open. That expression changes to something more subdued rather quickly, though, and the young man shakes his head reassuringly:

"I've already eaten. Thank you" he replies politely and looks away towards the forest, clutching his lyre a little tensely.

"You sure?" Will clarifies, but Matthew nods very confidently, and so Grahamson just sighs, shrugging his shoulders, starting to prepare the food, building the fire again, doing everything with time-tested confident movements. Brown all the while pretends to be very engrossed in looking at the dirt under his fingernails or the rustling leaves of the neighboring trees, as if trying to distance himself mentally from what's going on. Will did the same thing quite often when he lived at Hannibal's, and it's strange for him to see someone like this around him now. "So, who are you?" the exile asks suddenly, rather calmly, only slightly wary of his gaze as he twirls the meat of the bird strung on the makeshift skewers.

Matthew sighs slowly, lowering his gaze, contemplating everything, and then still with doomed determination suddenly raises a hand to his collar and lowers it enough to reveal the bird's mark on his chest. He is silent for a couple of moments as Will stares at him confusedly, gradually realizing who is in front of him, before still smiling uncertainly and looking up at the prince.

His bright eyes seem absolutely impossible, heartbreaking, too innocent for someone like him. Will might not have known about such people much when he was a mere prince and lived in the palace, but Hannibal had taught him that, taught him everything about magic, probably almost everything he knew himself. Such marks came either from a curse (and then they usually meant that the bearer had done something bad to a warlock or some other magician and was now his servant, sometimes even his familiar), or from birth - if one of the parents had devoted his life to magic, to the service of dark and mysterious forces. Such people mostly weren't bad, especially if raised not by their real parents, but who was willing to investigate? No one would waste time in a trial when they found someone with a mark - in all lands it was considered irrefutable proof of the person’s service to darkness, something enough to warrant a death sentence without any trial. The mark meant that the person could be very dangerous while alive and walking this earth, and that somewhere nearby was a witch or warlock, even more terrifying and dangerous, and only killing a familiar could weaken their power enough for a mere mortal to defeat them.

Hannibal carried such a mark, as did his sister. Their family had been killed, and he alone had escaped. Now Will was on his way to his house to find out what of what Lecter had said was true and what he had kept from him, as he had kept from him so much since they had met.

"I bear the witch mark" Matthew says, confirming his thoughts when he hears no definite response from Will. "Born with it, so my mother must have been a witch, I guess... I never knew her. I was dropped off into other family" he nervously fumbles the strings of his lyre under his fingers. "They weren't bad people. Helped me hide it and... all the magic that inevitably surrounded me" he smiles awkwardly. "My mom used to tell me that there were always birds flying around my crib - flying in through the window. She constantly had to chase them away so they wouldn't peck at our grain and make a mess."

"You're a birder," Will says quietly, amazed. He suddenly feels bad about his breakfast cooking on the fire at this very moment, and he looks away guiltily, not knowing what to do with this absurd feeling.

Thankfully, Matthew gives him an almost relaxed smile. "It's okay. I realize it's just hunting and you need something to eat. It's just... I prefer not to eat anyone whose speech I can

understand. Otherwise it just feels somehow wrong, you know" he tries to make a joke.

Will swallows, remembering the dinners at Hannibal's house. He stayed after the realization of what was on his plate for longer than he would have been comfortable admitting to anyone. He'd talked to many of these people when they came to ask Lecter for something; he'd killed a few himself when Hannibal had forced him into circumstances he wouldn't have otherwise been able to get out of. He fed it to Abigail and ate it himself.

But the worst thing is that he hadn't felt satiated ever since he'd switched to birds and hares and fish, and he hated himself for it, hated Hannibal. Every time he ate, he remembered Abigail, remembered the last dinner when it had been just him and Lecter at the table. A shiver runs through his body at the memory of the taste on his tongue and he feels sick to his stomach. He inhales slowly and then exhales through his nose, looking at the meat cooking on the skewer. Will removes it, placing it on a plate he made himself out of wood.

Thinking for a moment, he pulls an apple and a pouch of berries from his bag pocket and holds them out to Matthew; the young man smiles and gratefully takes the food offered to him, wiping the apple with his sleeve before taking a bite. "How did they find out?"

"Suspicions were always there, I think. I always seemed strange to them, out of this world" he shrugs and chews the apple before continuing. "But it all came to light when I let all the birds out of their cages in the bazaar while no one was watching and let them fly away. I got caught as a weirdo but they happened to see the mark and that's when I realized I was in a big trouble" Matthew sighs and shakes his head. "I was lucky that one of the hawks attacked the trader and I was able to run home to grab my stuff. But his screams woke up the other people and... they went for my house. Even though I wasn't there, they thought I was inside and set it on fire."

He looks down at his hand and slides his thumb over the fingernails of the others, and a small light appears above them, which extinguishes rather quickly - minor magic available to even the weakest of mages or subspecies of magical beings. Will guesses that no one taught Brown this. It's unlikely that anyone could have taught him magic at all, unless it was after his banishment, but even that's unlikely. Matthew didn't look like someone who could control the forces living inside him.

He remembers how Hannibal would light a fireplace with an even lighter motion, how he would summon the wind on a sweltering summer day, rain for their crops after a brief drought. He'd been learning magic since childhood, first from his parents, afterward from a warlock who'd taken him in for a while at his place. If Will understood the man's vague phrases about that time correctly, the warlock had fed him his sister, passing on to him the true secret of his power. After that, Lecter had killed him in a state of madness and eaten his meat, and that made him more powerful than any other sorcerer among all the kingdoms they knew.

"What about your parents?" he asks cautiously, and Matthew sighs, shaking his head.

"My father died when I was a child. And my mother... they thought she was my kin. Thought she was a witch - and how could they check? If she wasn't burned in the house, she was burned at the stake later" his voice is quiet and calm, almost colorless. "That was a couple

years ago. I've been wandering around without any purpose ever since, with the lyre as the only thing that is left of her."

Grahamson feels a slight tinge of pain and heartache, hears it in the music pouring over the lyre's strings. "I'm sorry," he says sincerely, and Matthew nods before looking up at him and smiling - calmly, even almost playfully.

"So here we are, two exiles" Brown says. "Where are you headed, Will?" he still says his name cautiously, as if he's not sure he's really allowed to be so familiar with a member of The royalty. Even though Graham wasn't his ruler, even though his kingdom was quite far from his home, William was still from a special, godlike family, the kingdom. His lineage went back to ancient legendary rulers, the first of whom were gods, of whom his mother had once sang songs to him. Matthew was inclined to be religious, and so in his eyes Grahamson was all about belonging to the descendants of the gods themselves. To call him by name, as a fellow, as an equal, was strange and thrilling; he felt like a criminal upon whom divine punishment might descend at any moment. It didn't matter that William was an exile, because in the kingdom or not, recognized heir or not, the same blood that had bubbled in his veins before he had killed that unfortunate baron flowed in him now. And he had healed his wounds, he had saved him from the brigands who wanted to tie him up and take him to the temple for sacrifice! He was his savior, and Matthew could not think of a way to thank him for such kindness, such grace. He had little to give him but himself, and even that didn't seem enough.

"To the northern lands" the man replies, hesitantly tasting the meat from his plate before pushing the unnecessary thoughts away and continuing to eat more confidently. "I want revenge on one man, and that is where his vulnerability lies. At least I believe so. I need to see it with my own eyes to figure out what to do next" he decides to say more, knowing that Brown will ask anyway.

Matthew raises his eyebrows and then tilts his head sideways very birdlike, looking at him curiously. "God. What's managed to happen to you over the years?"

"Well… more than I'd like to," Will grins unhappily, before lowering his gaze, gnawing into the meat in a vain attempt to satiate himself enough.

Silence hangs between them, there is only the young man's fingers sliding over the strings of his lyre, making light pleasant music. "I'll be your companion," Matthew says suddenly, and Grahamson looks up in confusion, staring at him incomprehensibly. Brown smiles. "You saved my life. And helping me with my wound, and not rushing to burn me at the stake because of who I am. I want to thank you."

"Just a simple thanks will be enough" Will says, feeling a little awkward and thus frowning.

"Thanks," Matthew says. "But I still want to be your companion. I can be quite useful on a long journey, and I will protect you, along with my birds" he suddenly smiles again, amusement sparkling in his eyes. "If you promise not to eat them anymore, I might be able to get hawks or other large birds to bring hares or other small animals for you."

Grahamson looks at the young man confusedly, mouth ajar, trying to find the right words to say no, but doesn't have time to do so when Brown continues with the fervor of a suitor:

"I mean, I don't care where I go anyway. I've been wandering without any purpose through forests and villages for a couple years now, almost always all alone, just with my birds... I could go north with you! It would give me some meaning in my life, a purpose, at least for a while! I beg you" he wants to call him by his title, but stops himself in time and instead smiles shyly, looking into his eyes, "Will..."

He sees the young man clutching the lyre's fingerboard and looks at him with a feeling somehow close to despair, as if his entire life now depends on his decision. The prince feels unaccustomedly timid, and he is suddenly confronted with the thought that so often visited him when Abigail asked him for something: he can't say no. And besides, isn't he tired of wandering the woods alone, without a living soul by his side? It would be so similar to the time he and Abigail had spent together before they ended up at Hannibal's, and that mental unsolicited comparison almost makes Will ache. Matthew's eyes, light as the surface of a brook in the deep woods, plead for his attention with the same tones that little Hobbs's river-blue eyes did. How could he leave him? Whatever the potential burden of the banished young man, how can Will just say no to him and leave him in the woods, wandering in painful loneliness until he is captured again by yet another bandit? Grahamson realizes with his mind that he is making a mistake, but his heart tugs painfully, leaving him no choice when he finally answers, lowering his gaze almost awkwardly, "the journey will be long, it could take weeks or even more. I don't want to obligate you to anything, but you can be my companion as long as you want it yourself."

Hearing no reply, he still looks up at Matthew and sees him smiling, his eyes glistening like the surface of a stream in the bright afternoon sun. It seems like something magical to the man, and it might not even be far from the truth. He smiles awkwardly at Brown, feeling odd, lowering his gaze again and wiping his cheek with a slightly nervous compulsive movement, only now remembering the trace of blood that has remained on it. It had mostly dried by now, and Grahamson sighed heavily, thinking that with the still limping young man, the journey to the nearest stream or river must take even longer, and he wasn't even sure which way to go to get to the water source sooner. He had seen Brown's flask, which might contain either water or some kind of alcohol, and he himself would only have enough drinking water for another day. Thinking about it made him nervous.

Matthew, who must have noticed him staring tensely at the trail of blood on his hand, takes the flask from the pile of his belongings and opens it, sitting down gently closer to him and gesturing for Will to help him wash up.

Will shakes his head, moving the flask away from him with his hand. "We don't have much water, and I don't know when we'll be able to get more yet. I'd rather have some left in case we get thirsty."

Brown frowns thoughtfully, looking at him as he screws back the cap of the flask and presses his lips together, lifting his gaze to the sky, which was partially obscured by the tall tree crowns. He smiles suddenly as a thought occurs to him, and he puts his lips together in a whistle, followed immediately by the sound of flapping wings, and Will turns his head from

side to side in confusion as he looks up at the approaching birds; he thinks it might actually be frightening, especially when a hawk, unafraid, it seems, of Grahamson, sits calmly on the log between him and Matthew. Will decides not to move, looking at the whole thing as if it were a miracle, which wasn't really far from the truth though. He returns his gaze to Brown, watching as two small blue-colored birds land on his raised arm. They chirp as they sit on Matthew, occasionally twitching their little heads, and Will stares at Brown's smile as if hypnotized at that moment. He whispers something to them, as if with his lips alone, at least the man can't hear anything, and then the birds answer him something, flying off in different directions, and they watch them leave.

The hawk, shuffling its feet, moves closer to Matthew, and the young man notices it and strokes its head with a smile before it too flies away. Just then, Brown looks at Will again and suddenly blushes embarrassedly, smiling in a way that brings adorable dimples to his cheeks. "They'll be back soon. I asked them to find out where the nearest river or stream is and if there are any dangers in the area" he explains, returning his fingers to his lyre, strumming the strings.

Will blinks confusedly, unsure of how to respond to that. "Thank you," he says nonetheless, and Matthew smiles charmingly, and Will thinks about how much he enjoys collecting his smiles, so genuine and honest. Abigail smiled like that occasionally, and he himself was not generous with such emotions; Hannibal smiled often, but in a different way, a predator always lurking in the corner of his lips, a sort of mockery when no one else understands some joke only he alone knows.

The prince wondered how the young man managed to keep that ability to smile even after everything that had happened to him, after the world had been so many times cruel to him in a completely unfair and terrible way. He didn't know how to ask this, and so he couldn't know that Brown had rarely smiled before this morning, much less genuinely, only to birds when they cheered him or pawed at his hand. With people, he was usually cautious to the point of paranoia, or mocked them if he thought they weren't dangerous and deserving of ridicule. Will, on the other hand, was turning something inside him, like there really was something of the gods in him, so bright, warming with his light. Matthew felt warmer with every glimpse of him.

The melody that his light touch spread through the area, like a light spring breeze and dandelion petals, mesmerized not only the birds chirping softly from the branches nearby, but Will as well; the man tilts his head thoughtfully to the side, looking at his newfound companion, and Brown, sensing his attention, begins to sing softly in his language, a song about the gods to whom Graham and all his sons, even the banished ones, are related. Will, of course, doesn't like reminders of kingdom and family, but what's the harm if he can't understand what Matthew is singing about? He can only enjoy the sound of his voice, birdlike and melodic, echoed by the chirping of the little songbirds of every color in the area, and that's a blessing. The fire crackles quietly, and Grahamson hesitates to say a word as he watches Brown, mesmerized by the movement of his thin, pale fingers, somewhere dirty from his fall in the mud, and the movement of his lips, which make sounds more beautiful than any other.

They are distracted from the melody only by the returning birds, for whom Matthew immediately extends his hand invitingly, and then, when they chirp something to him, he smilingly shares with them the berries Will had given him and lets them go, looking at the man again. "There's a river and a meadow with flowers that way. No predators there now, there have only been a couple stags" he tells them.

Grahamson nods. "And how far is that?" he asks, unsure if the birds could even pass such information to him.

Matthew hesitates, looking in the right direction, frowning slightly. The light whistling of birds comes to him. "When we reach the great tree, we'll be halfway there" he replies and looks at Will again. "Well, a tree that you can't wrap your arms around or something like that, I mean, a really big tree" the young man explains with a slight smile. "I think it's an hour's walk. Or a little more with my leg... There's a pretty good place to sleep nearby."

"Did the birds tell you all this?" Will asks uncertainly, now feeling even stranger at the fact that no matter what he ate, everything had enough brains to understand basic concepts of the world around him. Well, on the other hand, he's been in situations worse than this, isn't he? "Do you... eat only vegetation? Berries, vegetables, fruit, that's it?" he asks a little curiously.

Matthew shakes his head. "No, of course not. I eat fish. I'm not much of a hunter... and I'm not much of a fisherman either. But the birds help me," he smiles.

"I like to fish," Will decides to say. "When we get to the river, we can get ourselves not only water, but something to eat too" he says and Brown nods eagerly. "Good. Then we'll rest a bit more, and then we'll go... let me look at your wound" he asks, setting the things aside and moving closer to Matthew, and he gently pushes the torn edges of his pants away, looking at the wound that is healing quickly thanks to the potion. He is satisfied with what he sees and nods to himself, taking his hands off the slightly shy young man, picking up his flask to drink some of it.

Matthew, trying not to move his leg yet, looks at the man thoughtfully, mentally comparing him to a description he had once heard; the beauty of the youngest son of the king of a friendly kingdom was rumored far beyond the walls of his home palace, and once Brown, sitting in a tavern, in what seemed like a previous life before he had fled to the forests, had overheard a conversation between the girls who had been maids at the palace where Graham and his children were visiting. They chirped like birds with smiles about his curls the color of hot chocolate, and about his smile, warming like the same drink, a little mischievous, but not often appearing on his face. They sighed admiringly about his eyes, like gems in a fine frame, and about his moderately strong body, his confident figure, his voice, which gave them goosebumps. From their words, however, Matthew realized then that the young prince was quiet and preferred his sister's company to any other - Beverly was graceful and mischievous as a hellcat, and the maids thought of her and Will as kind and funny, pleasant people, unlike the rest of the royal family. It made Matthew sad to hear of the princess's death and then her brother's banishment, though he had never been acquainted with them. He was generally inclined to become attached to beautiful images, even if they were painted by people he had no reason to trust.

The maids didn't seem to have lied about Will, though - looking at the man now, even so many years after his trouble-free life in the palace, grown up, with drops of blood on his face from killing brigands, his shaggy curls dark in the shade of the tree, it seemed to Matthew that they had downplayed his beauty. This is how the young man imagined the demigods of the ancient legends his mother had once sung to him. He suddenly wanted to make up a song himself, dedicating it to Will, perhaps without even telling him about it, but for that he first had to get to know him better, to study more closely the story of the chapter of his life that had begun after his exile. Who did he want revenge on? What had happened to him over the years? Would he trust him enough to tell him, and how soon? Matthew decides to wait to ask, and instead begins to speak himself, to melt the ice already floating quietly on the surface of the river of their budding companionship.

He told him of his travels since his exile, of how he had twice escaped from the cage of the king's guards who had caught him for stealing or something similar, of how he had obtained food with the help of his bird friends, and of how he guarded his lyre. Will asks him what the engraving on his musical instrument is, and Matthew tells him with a warm smile that he made it himself after he escaped, with his magic, and that the inscription can be translated as "in memory of warmth." "When I play it, it's like it warms me" he says. "I remember evenings by the fireplace at my parents' house, how my mother taught me to play, to take care of this instrument, to cherish it..." a smile warms his lips. "I freeze easily. My fire warms me weakly..."

The last sentence sounds a bit embarrassed, as if he is ashamed of his weakness in the field of magic. Will decides to find out more to get a chance to erase that feeling of his and put a smile back on the young man's face. "No one taught you magic, right?" he gets a slight nod in response. "And how did you learn how to... do that fire thing?" he repeats his gesture indefinitely - the pad of his thumb slides over the tips of the others' fingernails - and gets a cute smile as a reward.

Matthew makes the same motion, and a light flame flares up over his palm, quite small - it's good for lighting a fire or something, but on its own it's unlikely to keep warm in the deep winter in the far north, where they're now making their way. "It came out by accident when I was a teen. It was the coldest winter ever, long and hungry, and I watched nervously as my mother tried to keep the fire going in the house, which wasn't keeping warm very well anyway. It was a nervous, almost compulsive movement, and I kept repeating it and repeating it, and then I felt a slight warmth in my fingertips... I was warming my mother and I's hands with that fire" he tilts his head to the side and sighs, squeezing his palm, and the flames fade away, leaving behind a light haze that dissolves into the air the next moment. "There's nothing else I can do, no matter how hard I try. It's... even frustrating, you know" he looks up at him. "They're afraid of me. The people. And I can't even hurt them. Harmless, unthreatening… it’s a shame".

"Some people are scared of not even poisonous insects either, you know, just in case" Will says, but then feels bad, like he might have offended Matthew with such a comparison; it's too late to take back what he said, though, and Brown only nods at him understandingly. "I'm not a mage or a sorcerer, but I was taught a lot of things by... one man" he sighs. "He told me about herbs, potion recipes. Told me how magic works, what it takes to be stronger..." he swallows and lowers his gaze, as if afraid Brown might read in it a shadow of the truth of his

past, the blood oozing from within him. "I can make potions and read the texts of magical books, but I've never cast spells out loud or anything like that."

"Why not? You have the blood of the gods flowing in you, if you took up magic you could do real miracles" Matthew remarks curiously, and then it's as if he reads something in Will's body language and realizes. "You're afraid of getting stronger?"

Grahamson thinks that's an interesting wording and, sighing, tries to find the right words. "In my situation, learning magic is like walking a rope strung across a chasm into madness and chaos. One uncertain action and I'll fall down, becoming either a madman killing everyone for what I think is a good cause, or a dangerous creature that, once learned of, will make all the kingdoms unite to get rid of it" he looks up at Matthew. "So I think I'll make do with potions."

Brown looks at him thoughtfully, nodding, understanding his train of thought. Will must be a really good man, honorable and careful and peaceful. And yet right now he is driven by revenge. Matthew cautiously moves closer to him, stopping playing his lyre. "That teacher who gave you the knowledge of potions," he begins, and by the worried look in his blue eyes he realizes at once that he has hit the mark, revealing the answer in advance, "is it his weakness you wish to find in the north?"

Will looks hurt, wounded, averting his gaze, and Matthew, looking at his handsome profile, suddenly realizes that the man before him is no more than a couple of years older than he is, a young man banished from his home before he came of age. Even though he had the blood of gods, the blood of kings, he was still so young, and all the traumas that had befallen him had not yet wrinkled his face, only a couple of scars scattered across his body, resembling a map of the starry sky along with the dried blood. He was strong in body and spirit, he had been through a lot, and yet behind the layer of all his trials, he was still a young man of no more than twenty-three years of age. If he had stayed in the palace, he might not have worn the stubble that added him a few years, and he might have looked younger, like a youthful prince who wowed princesses and maids with a glance, able to get anything and anyone he wanted. He could be spoiled, dancing at feasts, running away from the palace in pursuit of adventure to feel like an ordinary man, hanging around in a pub on the outskirts of the kingdom, grinning and joking at everyone who notices how strikingly similar he is to the Prince William. He could have been full of youthful antics, hunting with his brothers, learning diplomatic and military skills, yawning with boredom in his divinity lessons. He could have been carefree, happy - perhaps. But the gods had decided otherwise, directing his knife-wielding hand against the honorable baron.

Matthew was convinced that it couldn't have been for nothing - fate had something in store for Will, some great mission he couldn't fulfill by continuing to sit in the palace. He was doomed to a life of hardship and suffering, making his path thorny, but in the end he would surely do something great, something that would leave his name on the lips of his descendants, and Matthew would be the first to dedicate a song to his feat.

Will's silence drags on, and Brown already thinks he'll never get the story, but eventually Grahamson sighs in surrender, and, starting to sharpen his knife to get some distraction from the tension stiffening his body, still speaks. "Yes. I lived there with Abigail Hobbs for about a

year," he says, and Matthew is a little surprised - almost everyone was convinced that the girl had been murdered, the family even held a lavish funeral for father and daughter at once, but apparently they never actually found her body, deciding to just hush up the embarrassing story as soon as possible and divert attention away from their family. Apparently the girl had actually run off with her own father's killer, and Brown stares at the man interestedly, waiting almost breathlessly for him to continue. "His name is Hannibal, and he lives in the woods in a lonely house where a path leads from an old graveyard on the edge of the Crawford's Lands. He once lived in the north, was Earl Lecter, but his family was killed by the hunters chasing the servants of darkness. Well, at least that's what he told me. I now... doubt everything he ever told me, even if it looks like a true" he exhales quietly, taking a breath, sharpening his knife to perfect sharpness as Matthew listens to him silently.

"Because he deceived you?" Brown guesses, tilting his head birdlike again, looking into his tired face.

Will swallows, resuming the movement of the sharpening stone across the blade. It takes him a moment to consider what to say to Matthew, so as not to pick too much at his still unhealed wounds and at the same time let Brown know that he is trusted at least partly. "Perhaps the deception is really why I hate him. There were a lot of other things I should hate him for, but... I just can't find those feelings inside of me" he shrugs, feeling the truthfulness of those words cutting painfully from within his soul.

He really doubted there was anything divine left inside him after all this. Contrary to what Hannibal had believed, prophesying that he would become a great wizard, transform from a descendant of the gods into a true member of their pantheon, Will felt that every murder, every bloodstain on his face, was distancing him from what he had once been, turning him into a mere servant of darkness, doing his job shoddily, not causing senseless and merciless evil, just going his own way and sometimes even saving lives. It wasn't like a divine legend, it was more like a horror story that could be told to children for the sake of a cautionary ending. Even if Will manages to understand his enemy and defeat him afterward, he knows he can never be happy. Everything good that appeared in his life inevitably dissolved every time, without even giving him a chance to truly enjoy it. His beloved sister Beverly, who had fallen ill and died while Will had been forced to sit through a class on divinity lessons; her friends, who had been sent away from the palace and of fate of which Grahamson could only speculate; his own life in the palace, which had come to an abrupt and dramatic end after the first blood on his hands; Abigail... There was a new happiness looming at his side like a firefly in the night that he was convinced from experience would soon elude him, and he could only hope that Matthew would be luckier than the others. For that, he might have to cut him off like a diseased limb himself when they reached the city. Will will sell everything he collected from those bandits and give the money to Brown to make it easier for him to move on with his life without a path or purpose beyond. He might even be able to convince him that it's for the best, and keep the memory of his bright smiles and touching eyes alive for the rest of his own journey, untainted by blood. Hope for that was all that was available to him right now. He at least had to try to take this path, Will thinks.

He knows it will be hard.

Chapter 2

After a while, Will begins to leisurely pack up his things to move closer to the water, following the path prompted by the birds. He also manages to make a cane during their almost silent rest, diluted by the playing of the lyre and quiet songs, to make it easier for the young man to walk while his leg still ached. They still had to walk rather slowly, of course, but the birds were always chirping, and Matthew was happy to translate some of their messages for him, like "the great tree is very close, we can rest near it for a while," "there's a bush near here with lots of edible berries, we can stop and pick some to eat while we fish," "we need to go a little to the left, there are deer on the right, I don't want to frighten 'em with our presence." Will thought this all seemed rather cute, and he obediently followed his directions, glancing occasionally at him, and he was still smiling even though his leg was sore.

They reach the river sooner than Will could even hope, and the sun was still shining brightly, now not so much hidden by the tree crowns. He instructed Matthew to set up their future lodging nearby and make a fire, and he took the fishing rod he'd made himself some time ago and began to fish, relaxing at his favorite hobby, watching the thin line where it sank into the translucent water. The river here was shallow, and he had to walk quite a distance with his shoes off, standing almost knee-deep in it, to have a chance of catching anything. He continued to have bad luck no matter what, and soon Matthew came up beside him, also leaving his shoes by the shore, thanks to the potions already walking quite briskly and without his cane. "Catch anything?" he asks curiously, standing so close to Will that he has to suppress the reflex to pull away.

"No, but fish are always usually scarce at this time. We have to be patient" he says, instructing him the way he once instructed Abigail long ago, realizing it already after the words have flown off his tongue.

Brown looks wistfully at the surface, the fishing line disturbed only by the slight breeze, and then smiles again. Grahamson recognizes that smile, the face he makes when he gets an idea. A second later, Matthew whistles lightly, and the river hawk lands on his outstretched hand, tilts its head as if listening to a request that Brown whispered almost silently to him, and then flies away. Will looks at Matthew questioningly, arching an eyebrow, and the young man smiles, proud of his solution. "Wait for it," he says with a smirk, and a few minutes later the familiar hawk returns, holding its prey in its beak - Brown takes the fish and scratches the bird and it covers its eyes in pleasure, and only after receiving his affection does it fly away, apparently to hunt for itself.

Matthew proudly lifts the fish by the tail, and Will can't help but smile. "Take it back to camp. I'll try to catch something else" he says, and then decides to explain the answer to the young man's unspoken question, "I like the process. It... puts my thoughts in order. It calms me down. Even if I don't catch anything."

“I can relate” Matthew smiles a little, and understandably walks away to their campfire to leave the fish in a small cauldron there, and then, after a moment's thought, returns to the

surface of the water a little away from Will, so as not to disturb his quiet and peaceful fishing.

Brown carefully undresses to bathe while the sun was still shining high enough and the water was warm. He folds his clothes by the shore, planning to sew up the hole in his pant leg later, but for now, after cautiously inspecting the amazingly fast-healing wound, he wades naked into the water deep enough that it reaches his waist. He dives in for a few moments and abruptly straightens up, smiling, feeling many times better, refreshed. Matthew washes his short dark hair, missing the soap, and brushes the dirt under his fingernails. He strokes his skin, wiping away mud stains and sweat, standing sideways to Will, who stares quietly, cautiously in his direction, absolutely mesmerized. Brown runs his hand through his hair, tilting his head back, and the sun illuminates his face and shoulders, and he opens his eyes, exhaling with pleasure with his mouth slightly open. Will realizes he's peeking, that it's wrong, but he can't take his eyes off the young man's strong muscles, his relaxed shoulder line and open lips, the expression of bliss on his face. Only the sudden pull of the line distracts him and he turns away, pulling out his first catch, deciding to end the fishing session at that.

He, too, needed to wash off the sweat, dirt, and blood. Taking the fish to their campfire, he looks over his shoulder, finding himself staring at naked Matthew, shamelessly stepping onto the shore to his clothes. Brown manages to smile softly at him before Will looks away, feeling embarrassed. He sighs and decides to walk towards the water, trying not to look at Matthew sitting by the shore, mending the hole in his pants. Grahamson stops nearby, carefully removing all his weapons and clothing; he is resigned to the idea that he will have to get used to not having to wash alone, as he has been doing lately, and he shrugs off the thought that the last person to see him naked was Hannibal.

He steps farther into the water, first washing his face and hands clean of bloodstains. Will felt other man's gaze on him, but didn't feel entitled to turn around and cut it off - after all, he himself was staring at Matthew just a minute ago. It would be duplicitous of him to now make an issue out of the young man doing the same thing when he's the one bathing now.

And Matthew is watching. Will's slightly tanned skin is beautifully lit by the sun's rays, and rivulets of water run down his strong muscles; he is cleansing himself of the blood of the enemies he has killed, and it seems almost sacred, something very special, divine; Brown cannot tear his gaze away and feels a heavy urge inside him to recite the words of the prayer, which he does, with just his lips, so that Will will not hear him. He only returns to mending his pants when Grahamson turns around, heading back toward the shore. A smile still continues to play on his lips as he notices with the corner of his eye Will covering his groin with his clothes as he stops to dry off after his swim. "May I ask a personal question?"

Will looks back at him, but Matthew doesn't look up, continuing to sew. "You may. But I'll reserve the right not to respond."

Of course he'll respond, no matter what the young man asks. It had been the same with Abigail, it had been the same with Hannibal. He didn't like lying to people who, one way or another, found the keys to the musty and decrepit door of his lonely heart. He knew he should guard that entrance better, so that he would be less burned by loss and betrayal, but he had no

idea how to make that happen, so he just went with the flow, not learning from past mistakes, stepping on the same rake over and over again.

Brown smiles slightly, pondering his question for a while longer. Will watches the rays illuminate his dark hair and pale face as he licks his lips before he speaks after all. "What gift did the gods give you when you were born?" he finally asks, only then raising a look to the man as if guilty for asking.

Graham chuckles. It wasn't the hardest question, in a way it was easier for him to talk about it than what had happened at Hannibal's.

The gift was given to all the descendants of the divine clans, but it was different for all of them - some were given strength with which they could easily overpower anyone in hand-to-hand combat; others were given marksmanship, which allowed them to throw arrows straight at a target from a staggering distance; some were given gold, or some other material gift, like a magic sword or shield. His older brothers were gifted by the gods with agility, a talent for persuasion, and a mantle that was the best defense against the magic of any enemy. Beverly was given a book that held the answers to any question she had about the world, a book that only she could read - the girl had been reading it since childhood, telling him in the evenings how the stars worked and how to treat fractures properly, and he asked her his questions with a childlike innocence, and she would sigh with a smile and open the book and read him the detailed answer to everything he was curious about, such as how bugs fly, where spiders get their webs, why the sky is blue, and what wine does to adults to make them that weird. Will now wondered that if Beverly and her book were around right now, he would be asking very different questions, adult questions. Maybe it was a good thing she wasn't around - what he was wondering about now wouldn't have elicited the same smile from her. And what's the point of asking then?

He remembers being angry at the book that showed him only blank pages in response to his questions about how to cure his sister's illness. Beverly herself couldn't be conscious, couldn't read the answer. Her infinite wisdom died with her, leaving Will alone for the first time since his birth.

His own gift after all these years continued to give him only an unhappy laugh. "I'm very good at sensing other people's emotions and understanding their feelings sometimes better than my own" he looks at Matthew again with a smile. "The soothsayers called it The Mirror of Feelings. Empathy. Lots of use for that gift, huh?"

Brown looks at him with a feeling Will has no trouble reading as admiration, and it makes the man look away again. "Does it hurt?" Matthew asks suddenly.

Will ponders the answer. A light wind chills his skin, and he flinches. "Sometimes," he answers, and then still corrects himself, "more often than I'd like it to. There's a lot of pain in the world."

For a while they are both silent. Matthew looks at Will, and the man knows it, feels it. Will looks at the river, feeling the sun's rays drying the paths of moisture off his body, and thinks about the last time before he met Brown that he looked someone in the eye, and the memory makes him hurt. "Will," Brown suddenly calls out to him, "look at me," he asks almost

defiantly, and Grahamson turns around uncertainly. Matthew looks at him with his light green eyes, moving a little closer, and his face lights up with a genuine smile, dimples appearing on his cheeks and amusement sparkling in his eyes, and Will can't hold back a laugh before turning away a little embarrassed by it.

"Okay, okay, I get it" he says as he continues to smile, looking down at his hands, feeling someone else's lightness and mirth within himself and hearing the young man's laughter behind him. "Yes, you're very kind to me, Matthew."

Brown chuckled, tying a knot of thread and tucking the sewing supplies into his small belt pouch. "Looks like I can be useful with more than just my birds" he says, standing up, and Will casts a quick glance at him, immediately looking at the surface of the water again as Matthew dresses. Suddenly his palm rests on his shoulder and Grahamson reflexively looks over to see him, dressed to the waist and still smiling. "I can be a lot of fun, Will," he says, then looks toward their camp. "But it'll be a lot easier to do if I'm not so hungry. I'll cook supper!" he declares, running briskly away with his green shirt in hand to their prepared campfire, intending to take care of the fish, and the man looks after him for only a couple of moments before looking away and also partially dressing himself in his already dried pants. The shirt was too damp, so he wrings it out once more, slinging it over his shoulder, and walks back closer to the fire as well.

While Matthew takes care of dinner, Will sits nearby, looking around their tent. It was small, and they'll have to share it now, as well as the single blanket. Grahamson thinks about just giving the blanket to Brown, but immediately dismisses the thought - the young man won't let him do that. So he had to accept the thought of being forced into close contact with a man he'd known for less than a day. Will sighs.

Soon they are finally eating dinner, and it is starting to get dark around them. Sitting by the fire, Matthew plays quietly on his lyre, humming something in his language, and Grahamson contemplates asking him to teach him a few words so he can make some sense of it. But that could wait for now - he liked the young man's voice too much to interrupt his quiet singing, for which all the birds in the area seemed to be flocking.

If they did manage to be companions for a while on this journey, he could relieve the boredom of the trek through the forests with a little lesson in linguistics.

After a while, Matthew finishes the song and strums the strings of his lyre one last time before looking up at Will and smiling at him. Grahamson tries not to think about being caught staring again.

"Tired?" he asks instead of being embarrassed, and Brown nods, glancing toward their tent. "You can lie down, I'll take a look around" Will says, getting up.

"No need" the young man smiles, then whistles briefly. Will sighs, looking at the birds that have flown up.

"Don't they get tired of doing your errands in exchange for a simple caress or berries?" he asks as the bluebirds fly off in different directions.

Matthew smiles softly. "They miss affection from someone they can confide in," he replies, and looks at Will with a look that makes it impossible not to take the hint. In his eyes, he is the same bird, devoid of tenderness, doomed to wander alone between the lush crowns of trees and thorny bushes. Will doesn't respond, and in time the birds return, chirping something to Brown. "It's all right. If anything goes wrong, we'll be woken up" he assures him, getting up at last to follow Will and stretching himself and walking to the tent, holding the lyre like the dearest thing he owns. Will does the same with the blade, but more for safety reasons than any sentimentality.

The tent is small, bought by Will actually not too long ago in one of the towns on his route, but it accommodates two people in such a way that Matthew can even almost stretch his legs out, relaxing under the not-so-thick blanket. Grahamson appreciates that they don't have to discuss anything and silently lies down next to the young man, covering his eyes and exhaling loudly in this late night silence. Only the murmuring of the river and the chattering of insects could be heard nearby.

Sleep was not coming to either of them. Eventually Will felt Brown roll onto his side beside him, moving closer, and the man was faced with a choice he didn't really want to think about. It was getting colder, the blanket warming them poorly, and the young man clearly wants to be closer to his new friend, right now staring expectantly into his face.

Will tries to position himself as a simple pragmatist as he turns and stares back at Brown, preparing to touch his soft skin, but in truth, besides all the objective reasons for it, there was another, more human and real one: *he missed the human warmth beside him.* He felt *starved* for touch. The sensation had been almost imperceptible before, like a normal hunger, but his mouth filled with saliva and his stomach twisted with anticipatory pain from the moment something he'd craved had been right in front of him. All he had to do was hold out his hand and he could be satiated. And the prey doesn't even mind, it's *begging* to come closer, looking at him with a ready gaze Will had never seen before in his life. It strikes parts of his soul he hadn't even been aware of before.

Bright eyes stare back at him in the semi-darkness of the tent, clear and curious, studying every millimeter of his face. Will studies the young man in return, so far with just a single gaze, absorbing his emotions, reflecting them inside of himself, everything that now lies on the surface of Brown's mind: unabashed tenderness, tingling anticipation, cautious adoration. His lips move faintly, as if he's saying something, and it takes Will a few moments to realize the meaning of that action. "You're praying" he says quietly as soon as his lips stop whispering the words quieter than the wind.

Brown flushes and then smiles awkwardly, almost guiltily averting his gaze as if he's been caught doing something obscene. "It just... it seemed right," he says embarrassed, shrugging weakly. Grahamson wants to touch the blush on his cheeks, feel the heat beneath the usually so pale skin.

"And who do you pray to?" Will asks, and, more to relax the young man, to settle him into the conversation, gently touches his chin with a finger, sliding it trailing up to his cheek. He doesn't miss the way Matthew's eyes flare at such a simple touch, and a barely perceptible

shiver runs through his body. Perhaps he feels the same hunger Will does. Perhaps he's even starving.

He swallows. *"Heiroz,"* he answers honestly, not daring to lie, even though the answer drives him even more red. One of Will's distant ancestors, the god of love, devotion, and respect, the patron saint of all lovers, had flowers blooming inside him from his feelings for his friend, and only his kiss cured the god of that disease; that's how flowers appeared on earth - a symbol, a sign that love can heal. That is why lovers give flowers to each other, that is why girls weave wreaths to their boyfriends on May days, surrounding them with their love, healing their wounds. Heiroz valued devotion above all other virtues, and Matthew had not heard of a god closer to his aching heart. He prayed to him because he felt that if of all the gods would heed his prayers, it would be him. "I asked him to give me a chance to help you."

He managed to get nervous for a couple moments - after all, William really didn't like it when his family and his background were mentioned. But the man only chuckled. "Instead of sending messages to my ancestors, you could have talked to me. They're out there somewhere, out of reach. And I'm here" he strokes the young man's cheek and feels his breath hitch, sees him blink a couple times as if in an attempt to come to his senses, not quite sure if he read the message correctly or if he made up his own meaning to someone else's words, giving them feelings they weren't really full of at all.

He searches his face for a clue, and Will helps him, lowering his gaze from his green eyes to his slightly open mouth. A hand slides gently down his neck to the nape, fingers burrowing into his short hair, and Matthew exhales softly, closing his eyes and snuggling closer, touching his lips with a kiss, timidly. It takes his breath away, he's never kissed before, only seen others do it, in the tavern or elsewhere.

He'd heard stories from boastful boys about their first night with a woman, even about mutual touching with a friend, but he'd never gotten close to that kind of intimacy himself - not with a witch's mark on his chest that everyone and anyone would immediately fear, freak out, and wish him dead.

So he was embarrassed now, touching the man's lips with his own, not deepening the kiss because he didn't know how, and he was afraid of doing something wrong. Praying to God would be easier; this kind of praise felt with every cell in his body like something too emotional, especially when Grahamson decided to act himself, taking the initiative in the kiss, sliding his tongue over his lips, encouraging them to open, and gliding the tip over the edge of his teeth and over his own tongue, eliciting a quiet, slightly surprised moan from the young man.

Making himself comfortable, Will tilts him gently, forcing him to lie on his back without breaking the kiss, and his hand slides over his still clothed body until, eager for skin-to-skin contact, he reaches under his shirt, stroking the firm muscles of his chest. Matthew seems hot under his hands, trying to respond to the kiss, a little ineptly, but with an enthusiasm that makes something in Will's heart flutter like flower petals in the wind.

Brown's heart beats heavy in his chest and he wraps his arms around the man looming over him, fingers digging into his strong back through the fabric of his clothes, gasping at the feelings churning inside. They break the kiss, and Matthew gasps as he stares into Will's blue,

magical eyes, looking straight down at him from above like the god he is. The young man's chest heaves with his breath, and he seems to glow in that semi-darkness, frozen as if afraid to frighten away the delusion. Grahamson pulls away, his knees resting on either side of Brown's hips, and he pulls off his shirt, exposing himself; his eyes, slightly darkened, don't move from Matthew's figure as he hurriedly removes his shirt next; leaning in for another kiss, Will gets more contact with his skin, and it sends blood rushing through his veins. Brown buries his fingers in his hair, as if becoming a little more determined under the gravity of his arousal, and Grahamson feels goosebumps run down his back as he's pulled back slightly by his hair. He grins, trailing kisses down to the neck he's so trustingly exposed to him as Matthew mindlessly strokes his hair, running five fingers through the clean strands and breathing heavily, moving his lips soundlessly, thanking the gods, until an exclamatory *"Will!"* comes out of his mouth, loud in the silence of the night. A bite mark blossoms on his neck now, like a new mark, and he feels a strange satisfaction at the thought of it.

A shiver runs through his entire body. *He has been accepted. He belongs to Will now.* A servant of his god; legends say that Heiroz bound his faithful companion, his friend, his future lover to him with a bite; the scar remained on his pale skin forever, and in the sky afterward, a constellation of love appeared - two closely aligned stars surrounded by many others, folding into the silhouette of his neck and shoulder. Matthew feels awe, elation, like he's received a gift he hasn't even had time to deserve yet, and Will continues to kiss his neck, his shoulders, like he can't get enough of the feel of his skin beneath his gentle touches.

Brown clutches his hair at the back of his neck as Grahamson continues to nibble lightly on his skin, leaving no more marks, only making the snakes of pleasure ripple beneath his skin, sliding down to where he was already hard, tense. Matthew slid one of his hands along his back to his waist, as if he wanted to feel the heat of his divine skin, the shimmer of his muscles, the scars of a hard life. Warm breath scorches his shoulder before soft lips continue to caress his body, and Brown suddenly feels a desire rising from the depths of his subconscious - it feels so good, so good, and he wants to give that to his deity in return, to give him a sip of the same ambrosia that now spills over his soul, caressing every millimeter of his barely tanned skin. On this impulse, he pulls the man slightly higher by the hair, and their lips come together again in a kiss, and they both feel like travelers who have wandered too long in the desert and have finally reached the oasis of paradise placed in their path by the gods themselves.

He takes a quiet breath, not daring to open his eyes, and rolls over, finding himself on top of Will, feeling his fingers on his sides clench for a few moments in a way that seems to risk leaving nail marks. Matthew opens his eyes, feeling the storm in his heart, and caresses every curve, every shadow on the man's body with his light green gaze, feeling himself chosen, nuzzling his neck with the heat of desperation, the tenderness of his lips sliding lower, barely moving them, reciting a prayer, praising the body and soul before him. He acts on a hunch, almost instinctively, giving in to inner urges and desires as his tongue slides lower, circling around a nipple, and the quiet sound that escapes Will's lips from it sounds better than any song he plays on his lyre.

His nimble fingers glide along his delicious body, and he bites his lip as he gazes into the prince's face and meets his eyes, immediately breaking into a smile dedicated to him, to him alone. Playful stars sparkle in the young man's eyes, and Grahamson can't help but let his

emotions flow through him now - adoration, awe, an almost naive fondness, and a desire that makes him shudder impatiently in his place. Will beckons him for a kiss, and he obeys in the same instant, sharing the warmth of his lips with his. The prince's calloused hand slides down his bare back as the other passes over the strong muscles of his chest and slips beneath the fabric of his pants, boldly touching his hardness, and Matthew flinches, pulling away from his lips, squinting, and the heat of embarrassment on his cheeks draws Grahamson's gaze, though in this semi-darkness he's almost certain he couldn't have noticed such a change in the young man's skin color. Still, it seemed to him as if he could see his companion better in this darkness than at any time this day before, even naked in the bright sunshine. The way his eyelashes fluttered, the crease of tension between his brows, the ajar lips wet from their kisses. The feel of his fingers on his body as they slid along the semicircle of the scar on his stomach and lower, slipping under his pants with the hesitant movement of an inexperienced lover, embracing his member like a precious heirloom. Their foreheads touch as Matthew lunges closer and they share the same air together, stroking each other at a near-synchronized pace. A quiet sound escapes the young man's lips - one he's never made before in his life, not even when he's done something like this alone, furtively, away from any possible witnesses; it's like a pitiful whimper, sighs growing into quiet moans, and a wild whisper a little louder than his prayers, begging him not to stop. *"Don't stop,"* he says as if if Will removes his hand, Matthew will die instantly. Will doesn't stop, and neither does Brown.

"Look at me, Matthew," Grahamson asks in a hoarse voice between heavy rapid breathing, and what is left for his young man to do but obey? They look into each other's eyes, and as Will quickens the movement of his hand, Brown does the same, biting his lip but not daring to look away, drowning in the deep lakes of blue eyes in which sparkled now something predatory, animalistic, and the mere sensation of it, like sharks splashing on the surface of the sea, makes Matthew moan deeply, and he pours out. Will sees his normally pale eyes suddenly light up for a few moments with a deep green, no longer resembling the surface of a stream, but a forest of conifers or emeralds from deep southern caves. Along with this flash, he thinks he manages to see something else, like the shadow of wings on the top of their tent, but he doesn't have time to realize it, because the next instant he comes himself, head thrown back and mouth open, feeling overwhelmed with his own and other man’s feelings and at the same time blissfully empty, as after the explosion of a star.

Matthew falls on top of him, removing his hand from his pants and touching his shoulder with it, regaining his breath. Will doesn't push him off, feeling pleasantly pressed to the ground and surrounded by his skin, and drops his hand thoughtfully to his back, stroking his shoulder blades, as if for a few moments he really believed in the strange flash of shadow, as if wings like a hawk's, big and strong, could burst out of the man's body at any moment and cover everything around them, shielding them from all the hardships and injustices of this world.

Gradually their breathing subsided, and Will pulled his arms away from his body to take the blanket and cover them with it, preserving them from the chill of the night in each other's tight embrace. He could feel that Matthew was awake, though he could only see the top of his head as he lay there, throwing an arm and a leg over him, and without thinking about it he leaned down slightly to kiss his hair before cupping his palm on his chest and intertwining his fingers with his, knowing on a soul level that it made Brown smile. "Are you praying now?" Will asks, not expecting any definite answer, indeed feeling just mildly curious.

"No," Matthew answers quietly and rubs his cheek against his shoulder where his face rests. "I guess I was loud enough for the gods back then" he says playfully and Grahamson laughs softly, sliding his palm to his face, covering his mouth with his warm hand:

"Blasphemer" he mocks playfully, and Matthew laughs, and, feeling his smile against his skin, Will can't help but relax, slowly falling into sleep with a slight smile on his lips, must be for the first time in a very, very long time.

Chapter 3

Obeying an old habit, he awoke before the young man, and sitting down in the tent, he watched him in silence for some time, while he was sleeping peacefully under the blanket which Will, before he went out, lifted higher to cover his bare chest, giving him more shelter from the cold in his absence. The first thing he does is look around the camp and the nearest surroundings, picking berries from the bushes for Matthew and his birds. Once undressed, he enjoys the cool water and hot dawn sunshine flooding the meadow by the river with light, and notices a pair of birds perched on branches leaning over the river, chirping among themselves. Will is curious as to what they might be chatting about, and he smiles a little when they suddenly take off. He watches them go and realizes what made them so excited when he sees Matthew emerge from the tent, stretching sleepily and whistling softly. He holds out his hand and the birds land on it, and Grahamson watches silently with mild interest as he seems to be having a conversation with them about something before letting them fly away and starting to look for Will with his gaze, smiling when he sees him in the river. The man awkwardly waves a palm at him in greeting and Matthew laughs quietly, briskly heading closer to him. When he gets to the shore, Will can see the bite mark on his neck and wonders if he did the right thing under the impulse of emotion that night. It's unlikely, of course, that it had the same sacred significance one might see in it when looking back at ancient legends of the god of love, and the mark will probably go away after a while. But what if it will not? There was always the chance that Heiroz, who had never patronized him before, would decide to teach him a lesson for his indiscretion by binding Matthew to him until the death of one of them and even after that. With Will's luck, it could very well be quite a short time before that happens.

Brown doesn't look the least bit alarmed by the possible obligation tied around his neck in a fit of passion; he smiles, chin proudly up, wearing his scar like a piece of jewelry as he steps into the water at arm's length from Will, circling around him, keeping his gaze on the man like a hawk circling its mate. Grahamson smiles softly at him, beckoning him closer with a gesture, giving him permission, which Matthew immediately takes advantage of, coming closer and briefly kissing him gently on the lips, not deepening the kiss, moving quietly further into the river to swim, and Will looks at him thoughtfully as he beckons the river hawk over to him, probably sending it after its prey for their breakfast. Brown is standing sideways to him, head tilted back, clearly enjoying the sunlight and the slight noise of the forest, the murmur of the water. He is curious as to what is going through the young man's mind at this moment, but he does not ask, preferring to figure it out for himself without using words. He tilts his head slightly to the side, watching him, before he realizes, from Matthew's movements, from the way he strokes his neck, the way he opens his lips, from the slight blush that appears on his cheeks, that the young man is showing off in front of him, and it makes Grahamson smile foolishly, awkwardly, making him lower his gaze, feeling as young as when the girl first liked him.

Molly was a beautiful maid, quiet and funny when she allowed herself to be, and she was very much in love with him. Will had felt strange then, unable to reciprocate her for too many reasons at once, thus remaining just a friend to her; the feeling was different now. There was nothing holding him back; he had no obligations to the kingdom that would require him to

marry soon after his coming of age to a member of a neighboring kingdom or some highborn from their own. And Matthew was attractive to him. The way the sun illuminated his handsome facial features and the curves of his strong body, the way he smiled and laughed, the way he spoke and sang and played the lyre, the way he prayed and touched, the way he flushed and joked. And his eyes; his pale green eyes, like the water in a holy spring where, as a child, he washed his face before some sacred event in honor of one of the gods. Will watches as Brown slides musical fingers down his neck, pressing the bite mark and smiling with his eyes closed. Matthew wants to be his; he feels like he's found the meaning of his existence, a purpose restoring a path that had previously been one of chaos and anxiety. For him, any attention from Will is a gift from the gods, something to be thankful for, so that they don't spite him, so that they don't take this away from him, so that they let him bask in the glow of his alleged greatness for just a moment longer than he thinks he deserves.

He doesn't even know me, Will thought with a hint of fear stirring in his chest. He can't even guess what's happened to his divine soul in the time he's been banished, the time he's been living with Hannibal. A boy who doesn't eat bird meat because he understands the language of birds. How will he react when he learns that the idol he so recklessly chose to worship has killed, dismembered, cooked, and eaten people with whom he had previously sat at the same table? Would the acrid fear burn through him, would he run away, would he regret the mark on his neck, the fact that he had bound his soul to such a monster? Or will he accept it, for who but a faithful boy would know how cruel and bloodthirsty the gods can be sometimes? He prays to Heiroz, and that god's hands were far from clean of blood, he killed in the name of his lover as he killed in his name. They killed the god of war together, forcing him down into the underworld, the realm of darkness and death, because he wanted to keep them apart and make them fight against each other. But even this murder wasn't even close to what Will and Hannibal did. Will Matthew be able to understand him when he doesn't understand it himself? Will he be able to forgive him when he can't even do that for himself?

Their eyes collide, and Brown smiles brightly at him, squinting slightly and tilting his head to the side, as if he's noticed something in his eyes and is now trying to figure out what's going on inside Will. The man doesn't let him do that, mirroring his emotions instead and smiling, stepping closer to him; Matthew realizes this and snorts, rolling his eyes as if to say - okay, keep your secrets, I'll find out everything anyway. In the meantime, he lets him walk away from their wordless conversation, wrapping his arms around his shoulders and pulling him into a kiss that tastes like berries he picked near the river, sweet and sour, whetting his appetite.

To their luck, soon the two hawks return to them, each with a fish in their beaks, and they go to breakfast, building a fire. As their skin dries, they dress, and Will still can't take his eyes off his neck, which the collar of his shirt opens so attractively and temptingly for all to see. Matthew seems content under his eager gaze, strumming the strings of his lyre, pondering a new song, and Graham watches him thoughtfully, listening to the pleasant music.

"I've only been to Ophelia once, back in a previous life," Will remarks, and Brown looks up curiously as he continues to play. "But I was only in the capital. How was it in the rest of the kingdom?"

Matthew smiles slightly, changing the tune a bit, repeating the anthem of his homeland. "It's the northwest, so it's pretty cold there, especially in the winter. You're lucky you came in the summer" he remembers and clarifies, seeing the man's questioning look, "rumors, your highness. I loved to overhear other people's gossip, especially from the women and men who worked at the palace. And the arrival of the royal family from Calorian was a real big deal. Everyone felt closer to the gods then" he gently runs his fingertips over the strings of the lyre. "It's quite noisy there, even away from the capital. But there are some very beautiful mountains nearby, cliffs... there are many birds of prey, eagles and hawks" Matthew's face lights up with a soft smile. "If legend is to be believed, among them lies the Lake of Nirona."

Will knows that. Stories of the legends of their gods were a big part of the royals' education, and he wasn't spared that either. Not to say he really found it all that interesting, but against his will he always listened more closely when the teacher started talking about the gods that had founded his bloodline and all those most closely associated with them. His lineage went back to Heiroz, the god of love, and Fluria, the goddess of death. When Heiroz and his lover, Arson, defeated Hailoth, the god of war and strife, she agreed to imprison him in her underworld for some time, but in exchange she declared it necessary to establish a special kingdom in the human world. From their blood came the first member of his family, and Omelania, goddess of science, daughter of Nirona, goddess of nature and patroness of the arts, became a wife of this man. Omelania gave Beverly the book of truth, Fluria gave most of his brothers strength and invincibility in battle, and to him Heiroz gave his empathy. He'd been dormant for quite some time before that, as if he'd forgotten about his descendants for a hundred years, and it was only for Will's sake that he'd condescended to give him a useless gift that Grahamson was sure would be easier to live without. But the gods, of course, are never wrong with their gifts. He knew that.

The Lake of Nirona was a special place, but it was hard to get to, and Will hadn't heard of anyone who had managed to return from there in the last centuries. The last person who had succeeded was Arson, a young man who had been chased from his home by his family and war and had to go wandering the world until one day, tired and weary after a long hot day, he found himself by a lake, from which he immediately took a drink of water, gathering it into the palms of his hands. The magic liquid endowed his hands with the ability to play any musical instrument, and his voice became capable of comforting the wounded and dying, bringing lovers together and stopping quarrels and battles. The goddess who appeared beside him guided him to the right path of how to use his new powers, and he accepted her gifts, bowing to her and thanking her, promising to bring beauty and goodness to the world as long as he walked this earth. She accepted his vow.

He was able to find his way back to the city thanks to the flute, its sounds summoning nearby animals and flying birds that led him down the mountain, making a path for him until he finally found himself in his hometown. The city was in civil war, and only Arson's singing could stop the blades and arrows; this incident drew to the young man the attention of the god of love as well as of the god of war, and it was only thanks to Heiroz that the musician was not killed by the enraged Hailoth. The god of love took Arson under his protection, and soon they fell in love, binding their souls together with a bite.

It wasn't hard to guess why Matthew was so fascinated by their story. He was a romantic. Will, on the other hand, knew the details of a legend that had been passed down by word of

mouth for centuries - he had read in secret books the writings of his ancestors, describing the history of the progenitor in great detail, without omitting its ungenerous moments, which mere mortals were not supposed to know about, lest they desecrate the memory of the gods and anger them. Will didn't want to ruin the perfect picture in Brown's mind by telling him that Heiroz, though he was soul-bound to Arson, sharing meals, bed, feelings, and thoughts with him, still had lovers and mistresses, spreading love all over the world, and in response to Arson's resentment, he justified himself by saying that it was only his nature as a god of love, that he couldn't give all of himself to just one young man, leaving all the others out of the picture. Arson was not satisfied with the god's cruel answer, and he fell silent, no longer touching his flute, no longer giving peace and love to anyone with his voice. Then Heiroz became angry, but he was too proud to ask forgiveness from a mortal. Without his voice, even the god of love could not love as before.

The legends of the people are silent as to what the god did during that period, before flowers sprouted within him at the command of the goddess of nature, who had sheltered Arson for a time and wanted them to return to each other. Nirona told Heiroz, who turned to her, that he could be cured only by the kiss of true love, and then he kissed the whole pantheon before returning to his lover. Only exhausted from the flowers in his lungs and heart did he return to Nirona in the mountains, kneeling before Arson, but no sooner had he begun to beg his forgiveness than he lost consciousness. In that instant everything froze in languid anticipation - Love could forever die of love. Only Arson's sincere, unfaded feelings, not allowing him to endure even the idea of his lover dying, saved Heiroz from death, and he kissed him, taking away the pain, lulling him with his gentle voice.

It was not customary for them to talk about the fact that Heiroz remained a stubborn, proud creature until the last moment of his illness. Before he was cured, he had put a curse on the people, and so unrequited love, marriages of convenience appeared, and many people had to accept the fact that from now on and forever, love would involve suffering, no matter who it was between. This curse was kept from the people. They preferred to say it had always been like this.

Will chooses not to break it. Legends are much better when they bring peace and hope than when they break the heart.

"You have a beautiful voice without Nirona's waters" Grahamson says instead, and Matthew smiles, lowering his gaze shyly.

"I doubt it can stop arrows in flight" Brown remarks jokingly, but he still looks more than pleased with the compliment. "But I'm glad you like it. I think that's good enough for me" he says simply and honestly, and Will feels his happiness like the rustling of rose petals in his chest. He thinks again of Heiroz and his illness.

The legends of the gods were needed for people to learn from their mistakes. Will, looking at Matthew, promises himself that he won't break his heart, drowning out the sound of his voice with his coldness, that he won't be prideful. The only obstacle to that promise was his stronger-than-love desire for revenge against Hannibal. What would he be willing to do to accomplish this? If faced with a terrible choice, what would he do? Will he take the path of love or the path of death? Will he be able to merge these paths into one, and what will happen

if he accomplishes this? The blood on his hands and in his stomach weighs down his heart. He thinks of Hannibal, who tried by all means to help him become a true god, and shudders. Every piece of human meat made him stronger, every book he read about magic, every day with Lecter did something frightening to him, something he was sure would go against the wishes of gods and men. And what was most terrifying about it was that it might have worked; Will would have done it out of his love for him, would have succumbed to his influence like clay obedient under the fingers of a skilled potter, would have pretended not to notice any deception, any malice, if it hadn't been for what had happened to Abigail. It had broken his heart, and even the feelings he was beginning to have for the person he'd bonded with were festering into shards that bled in his chest rather than gluing it back into place, piecing it together. Nothing could put him back together. Not anymore.

Soon they were traveling farther north, and Matthew was sending scout birds ahead of them to warn them if there was a predator or other danger nearby. Brown continued to play the lyre, humming a song in Ophelian, and Grahamson listened to the words caressing his ears like sweet ambrosia flowing inside his body.

"Will you teach me some Ophelian?" Will asks when Brown finishes singing, just barely touching the lyre with his fingertips.

Matthew smiles amusedly. "Why do you want to learn Ophelian?" he asks.

Grahamson shrugs. "Well, it might be helpful, don't you think?" he turns over his shoulder, looking at Brown walking beside him with a slight smirk. "You sing in it. It's a beautiful language, very... musical, I think."

"Other people's languages often seem more melodic than yours. And I figured you just wanted to know what I was singing about" Matthew rolls his eyes, and Will responds to this accusation by jokingly leaning his palm against his chest, causing Brown to smile cheerfully. "I'm a bad teacher anyway. But I can give you a few phrases. What do you want to know?"

Will hesitates, continuing down their path. "What about 'thank you'?" he decides to start with the basics until something better comes to mind.

"Aina," Matthew replies, and Will tries to repeat it. "Yeah, good. If you want to say 'yes' you can use the neutral 'yah'. 'No' would be 'turo', but if you're talking to someone above you in status, you should use 'turosa'. Though I don't know who would be above you in status really, son of the gods."

"Aina" Grahamson says and looks at Brown's smile. "What about please?"

"Shaele" Brown says, and Will repeats. "You want to know what 'I'm sorry' would be?" he asks suddenly, perking up.

"What?"

"Ma thew" the young man looks up at him with a smile, and Grahamson doesn't know what to say to that, looking into his face. "That was what my parents read in the note I was found

on their porch with. Naming me that was my dad's idea. He's always had a bad sense of humor."

Will wants to say he's sorry, but stays silent, only nodding thoughtfully as he walks beside him. He can't hear the melody of the lyre - Matthew has put it away. "Did you ever want to meet her? Your mother."

"Turosa," Brown smiles, and Grahamson rolls his eyes.

"I'm not above you in status. We're both exiles, and we're companions," Will insists. "We're equals."

"Not exactly," Matthew replies, shaking his head. "But I'm glad you feel that way. Really" he ponders for a few moments, looking ahead of him rather than at Will. "Arsoline" he says cautiously.

"What does that mean?" Grahamson looks at him curiously, but it's as if Brown himself is shy to reciprocate in this.

"It means- it means something close to what you call a lover. Literally a friend of mind and body" Matthew explains, only then smiling softly as he looks at the man. "It's not a bad word. I like the idea of being your arsoline."

"Well..." Will shrugs, walking further with him, "then I'm your arsoline too, aren't I?"

"No, no," Matthew shakes his head.

"Why not?" Grahamson asks, looking closely at his profile, a little tense. "So it's not such a good word then."

"It just doesn't properly describe how I feel about you," he presses his lips together, contemplating something more appropriate until he finds the one word among all the others. "Min shahmer" he finally says, looking up at him with light bright eyes, bestowing him with a gentle smile. "Fire of my heart."

Will feels strange, but he smiles back at him slightly. "I don't think I've earned it yet, to be honest" he says uncertainly, stepping forward.

"Love is not something to be earned" Brown shakes his head. "Heiroz planted a lavender seed in my heart at my birth, and your gaze gave it the light it needed to sprout within me. So that's it" he says, playing a couple notes on the lyre again, and then their gazes collide and he smiles warmly. "In Ophelian there are several words for fire. One is for the kind that keeps you warm, that you cook dinner on, that lights the streets. The other is for the fires that take homes and bodies with them, the fire that destroys."

"And which... which of those meanings is placed in 'min shahmer'?" Will asks.

Matthew shakes his head. "The third one. Sacred fire from the temple of Felina, the progenitor of all the gods."

Will wants to answer but can't find the words; fortunately, Brown doesn't expect him to respond, walking forward until the birds on the branches beside them begin to chirp and he stops, gesturing for Grahamson to stop as well. "There's a road ahead. And on the road is the royal carriage and guards."

"What kingdom?" the man asks, frowning.

Matthew whistles something to the birds, and they chirp back, and eventually he only shrugs. It must be something far away, Will thinks, looking tensely toward the road. He tells Brown to be quiet and follow, moving cautiously forward with the young man to see with his own eyes who they've met on their way. If it is someone from the north, he might learn something useful, overhear the guards talking, or see the ruler. He stops at the bushes separating the forest from the road and peeks out cautiously, noticing a woman with blonde hair in a red dress standing tiredly beside the carriage with a glass of wine in her hands. It seems something had happened to the wheel, and now she had to wait for her subjects to fix it before she could travel further afield.

A coat of white fur is thrown over her shoulders by one of the men, and she gives him a patient look, saying something in a language that seems familiar to him for some reason; next the man answers her, and Grahamson's gaze lights up with realization. Central Lands. The kingdom with a parliament, the fictitious power of Queen Du Maurier. The man sheltering her from the cold was none other than Antony Dimmond. Will remembers his voice, the way he calmly pricked human meat on his fork, asking for help with a coup in his country. King Fell has passed away - Hannibal is a man of his word after all - and now the Head of Parliament and the Queen of the heartlands are heading through deep woods far from their home, and Will can only wonder why.

Grahamson tries to listen, though he doesn't understand the language, hoping to hear the names of any cities or kingdoms or rulers, but suddenly something comes out of Dimmond's mouth that makes him wince. **Hannibal**. They're talking about ***Hannibal***.

What the fuck.

He presses his lips together, looking at the three guards. Why is this royal company traveling with such a small guard? It looks suspicious, but Will wants an answer about why Dimmond is taking Du Maurier to the sorcerer. Trouble in the kingdom? Grahamson assesses with a quick glance the one guarding guard and the two who are busy fixing the carriage, and notes the sword in Dimmond's scabbard. The queen probably had her own blade somewhere in the folds of her dress or underneath it, too.

Making a decision, Will gestures for Matthew to stay where he is and be quiet, and only then takes a step into the road, ready to grab his weapon if necessary. "Dimmond!" he pitches his voice, proclaiming his presence in advance and drawing the group's attention.

An elegant man with dark, wavy hair turns to look at him, eyebrows raised, and the queen beside him draws her knife, preparing to defend herself. Antony, however, looks at Will and recognizes him and blurs gradually into a smile and gestures for the woman and guard to put their weapons away. "It's alright my dear, this is an old friend of mine" he explains, and Will could argue with that statement, but only frowns and stops silently a few meters away from

him. "Well! May I present to you, your majesty, this is the Prince William, son of Graham, exiled heir of Calorian" he bows jokingly, pointing at him with his palm, and Bedelia looks at him thoughtfully wary. "And this, my dear friend, is Madam Bedelia Du Maurier, the Queen of the central lands, the first of her kind."

Will doesn't bow - he never does. "Why would the queen of the central lands be looking for Hannibal Lecter?" he goes straight to the matter of his concern.

The woman tenses at his brash question, while Antony remains just as calm and relaxed. "A little trouble in the kingdom. Civil war to be more precise" he shrugs. "Still under control for now, but we could use some help to avoid revolution and... unnecessary bloodshed. What interests me," he takes a step forward, tilting his head slightly, looking at Will curiously, "is what are you, your highness, doing here, so far from your lovely gingerbread house? Has Hannibal decided to make a change of residence?" he smiles slightly.

"Hannibal will kill you if you approach him a second time" Will says confidently instead of answering, giving the man a complimentary warning and then looks over his shoulder at Bedelia. "He might spare the Queen, though. Does she know?"

"About the special menu? Of course, my dear," Dimmond purrs. "The situation is critical, we're ready for anything. So what are you doing here anyway, handsome? And where's Hannibal?" he tilts his head to the side, looking somewhere behind him for a moment. "Is he the one hiding in the bushes?"

Will stiffens, frowning at Antony, and then turns, looking over his shoulder but seeing no one there; Matthew, as far as he could tell, remained stealthy.

"I got something from good old Uncle Fell, William," Dimmond eagerly explains the mute question with a smile, raising his hand with a ring the stone of which burns emerald with a little bit of blue in it. "Can detect nearby magic. I doubt it's from you, the glow would be just all blue. So who's hiding out there? I don't think it's our friend Lecter, he'd be out ahead of you, not hiding in the bushes" he remarks calmly and then leans slightly to the side, facing the direction Matthew was sitting. "Come on out, darling. We didn't run away from the war to fight, don't worry. We don't bite."

Grahamson tensed, waiting for Brown, but he didn't show himself for the next minute.

"Come on, please me, satisfy my curiosity!" Antony cheerfully says, and Will knows that threats and a fight will follow that warning.

He knows why Matthew isn't coming out and exhales quietly, turning behind his shoulder. "Come," Willliam allows, and after a couple moments of indecision, the young man does show himself from behind the trees, causing Dimmond to smile enthusiastically as the man enjoys some joke of his own, not yet spoken aloud.

"Only listens to you, hmm? Didn't think you'd get a familiar, Will" he says playfully, keeping his gaze on Matthew, with tension in his body stepping closer to Grahamson, standing slightly behind his right shoulder, looking proudly and boldly into Antony's eyes.

"Familiars are the lot of sorcerers and witches. Sons of the gods cannot have them" the prince replies flatly.

Dimmond's gaze wanders down Brown's exposed neck, clinging to the bite mark. "No, they can't" he purrs, tilting his head to the side, finding it all maddeningly fascinating and intriguing. "You surprised me, Will" he finally looks at the man again. "I didn't think Hannibal would allow such a thing. You seemed so close."

"Hannibal and I parted ways a long time ago, Dimmond," Grahamson cuts off. "He no longer has power over me."

"Well, that's obviously not true," Antony smiles calmly. "There's no way I will ever believe that he just let you go, so you seem to have escaped him in some miraculous way" he ponders aloud, circling his shining ring with his fingertip. Matthew thinks about sending a bird in the night to steal it. "So what happened between you two? Decided to change your diet and he didn't like it?"

Brown silently listens and watches, keeping any questions to himself. Will gets irritated and even thinks about just killing everyone, and he might have done so if Matthew hadn't been around; the young man could have been hit by an arrow or sword during the scuffle, and that would have been unpleasant and very inconsiderate of him, so he just sighs.

"If you really are so bold and foolish to return to him with a new request, I can only wish you a painless death, Dimmond. He may have liked your audacity last time, but it won't work again. Rumor has it he's gotten angrier since I left."

"So maybe I need to take you with me to placate him?" Antony smirks, looking Grahamson in the eye, and Will tenses, placing his hand on the hilt of the sword hidden in its scabbard. "Oh, well, why do we have to fight, darling? I'm sure we can agree on everything. You know he won't really leave you, not until one of you is dead. So why don't we agree on a little cunning plan instead of starting a bloodbath in front of a beautiful lady."

"Is there a third option?" Will asks calmly.

"I'm afraid not, my dear," Dimmond smiles.

Matthew shifts his gaze to Grahamson, reading his posture, his willingness to draw his sword and the determination in his gaze. He hesitates, and Brown guesses that it must be because of him, and decides to act first; sighing quietly, he turns away towards the woods, with his lips alone calling to the birds quieter than the wind, trying to look calm and at ease. "Well, in that case, I won't get in the way of God's wrath if you don't mind," he smirks, glancing again first at Antony and then at Will, taking a step back, fingering the strings of his lyre, and not taking his eyes off Grahamson's, not even flinching when he hears the shriek of the guards being attacked by birds of prey, scratching their faces with sharp claws. Will in contrast turns around, reflexively drawing his sword; Dimmond too finds himself attacked a moment later, only Bedelia remains aloof from everything, holding onto her knife, shifting her gaze from one bird to another in cold panic. "Your move, min shahmer" Matthew utters, tilting his head to the side, looking expectantly at Will, wondering what he will do.

Grahamson presses his lips together as he looks at Dimmond trying to fight off the birds. Then Will stops his gaze on Du Maurier, making eye contact with her, hiding his sword. "Have a good journey, your majesty," and turns around, gesturing for Matthew to follow, and the young man obediently complies, only glancing over his shoulder a couple of times at Bedelia, who, having realized that she is not threatened by the birds, does not help anyone fight them off, but merely watches with a kind of oddly cold curiosity. Brown and Will walk away from them, and only after a while do the birds fly away from the guards and Dimmond themselves.

Antony touches his bloody wounded face, wrinkling his nose in pain and looking in the direction the travelers had gone, clenching his hands in a fast-passing fit of anger that changes to cold calculation, and he smirks lightly at Bedelia, commanding the guards to hurry up and get on their way. Du Maurier calmly hands the man her handkerchief and he wipes the blood from his face, and one of the hawks returns shortly to Matthew, dropping a shimmering green ring into his open palm.

He has a satisfied smirk playing on his face.

Chapter 4

By evening they have traveled far enough to make a small lodging. If Matthew's birds were to be believed, by the next night they would reach a small town where they could sell the things they had taken from the bandits and spend the night in a tavern with a warm hearth, a bath, and a better bed. According to the maps, after this settlement on the outskirts of Coldville, there were no other towns on their way to Hannibal's homeland, and they will have to walk north for some time, hoping to find lodging in one of the houses that, according to rumors, have all been abandoned long ago.

Will couldn't stop thinking that perhaps his journey would be in vain, and he would be left to wander around the Lecter family's estate, if it hadn't been burned down years ago, leveled to the ground because of a burning hatred of the citizens. And yet there was a feeling inside him that all was not in vain. He clings to that clue of intuition and shoves the useless worries away from his mind, lifting his gaze from the fire to Brown helping a wounded hawk heal his wing with a small amount of potion. He realizes almost immediately that Matthew has been seeking his gaze all this time, must have been looking at him intermittently in patient anticipation, and now, catching it, smiles and gently releases the bird, stretching his frozen hands closer to the fire, looking at Will over it, clearly wanting to ask something, but biting his lip, stopping himself before he says something ridiculous.

"What?" Grahamson asks, smiling faintly as he continues to sharpen his hunting knife, unable to stand the anticipation of the question.

Matthew only decides after a couple more quiet breaths. "The special menu Dimmond was talking about is human meat, right?" he asks, and the smile falls off Will's face. He swallows tensely, licking his lips, avoiding looking at Brown, and the silence between them lingers, making the answer obvious; eventually Will nods nonetheless, not trusting his voice, and continues sharpening his knife. "That's what I thought. Rumor has it that sorcerers draw their power from it. Human flesh makes the magic inside stronger" his voice doesn't sound scared, he clearly guessed everything before. Will only has to wait for him to guess the rest as well.

"That's right," he nods, still avoiding his gaze, occupying himself with sharpening arrows for his bow, as if focused on that, detached. Doesn't let any feelings rise to the surface, drowns them inside. "Hannibal killed travelers who came for his help if they didn't seem worthy of his magic. The rude, the ignorant, the stupid, the insolent. If a person failed to gain a modicum of his respect or compassion, he killed them, fed on the meat, and fed it to those of the travelers who managed to make it to the table" when he tells it, the story seems like a child's horror tale that adults use to encourage children to stay out of the woods, and so the realization of its veracity makes him squirm uncomfortably in his seat. "He did not reveal the contents of the plates to everyone until after the meal. If those bore the news with dignity, they could go, confident that their wish would come true. If not..." he sighs, shrugging his shoulders, "the next traveler had something to eat."

Silence reigns for a while. Then Matthew asks: "How long were you at his place?"

A heavy sigh of reluctance to answer. "A few months. About six months" Will answers more honestly after all, and then decides there's no point in playing innocent. He could lie, but what good would that do? He should resign himself to giving Matthew the whole truth and seeing his reaction now instead of torturing himself waiting for god knows how long more. "Before you ask anything else, yes, I knew most of the time. Not from the first day or even the first month, but he eventually told me. And I didn't walk away. Not then," he raises his gaze, looking at Brown.

The young man looks not shocked, but frozen, thinking things over in a slow, unhurried manner. "But in the end you left. Why?" his eyebrows frown slightly as he asks.

Will shakes his head, looking again at the arrow with the already sharpened tip. "I wasn't there alone. Abigail was with me, the whole time. She didn't know. I asked him not to tell her, and he agreed. He took care of her like she was his daughter, and I let myself relax, put up with everything. I enjoyed that life. Perhaps not even in spite of, but because of the darkness that surrounded us" he takes a new arrow, examining it in the light of the fire. "He wanted to make me a god. I resisted, albeit lazily. Said I wasn't ready. Said I wanted peace, to take care of Abigail. I wish I hadn't told him that…" Will sighs, his shoulders slumping heavily, and he presses his lips together. The arrows remind him of hunting with his little Hobbs, of the best time the two of them had. How she'd been glad to see a dead deer that she hit right in the eye with an arrow, and how she'd laughed at Hannibal's jokes about being a very bloodthirsty young lady.

He was silent. Silent when the man taught her how to cook. Silent at dinner. Silent just to keep things happy, like trying to hold a fragile teacup in his hands during a terrible earthquake. And this is what it came to.

"He killed her," Brown says quietly as his silence drags on. Will nods. "I'm sorry," honestly, barely audible.

"Yeah," a quiet sigh. "He told me at dinner that she'd learned the truth. That she'd turned out to be weak. But I knew he was lying to me" a crooked, pained smile tears across his face. "I knew, because I did tell her everything a couple weeks before. She took it easy - easier than I thought she would. She cried a little, but eventually accepted everything - she always cared more about animals than human beings. She only asked me why it had been kept a secret from her. I couldn't even find something to answer her" Will chuckles, shaking his head. "So I realized he was lying to me. Right to my eyes. And I wondered what else he was lying to me about, lying all this time. Lying was such an easy thing for him to do... and then I couldn't think about anything. I was hurt, and I was angry. I grabbed a knife and attacked him. He had a knife too - we both hurt each other."

"The scar on your abdomen" Matthew says quietly, remembering how gently he stroked it, kissed it that night, without thinking about how exactly the man got it. It wasn't like a wound from a sword fight. Now he understood, had his answer.

Will nods. "I tried to figure out why he did it to Abigail. Asked him, bleeding in his arms, holding onto the hilt of the knife sticking out of his shoulder. He didn't answer, but eventually I realized - she'd gotten in the way of my becoming. He thought her death was necessary for me to let go of earthly life and thoughts of rest, and become what he'd always seen in me. A

God. Bloodthirsty and powerful" he wrinkles his nose. "He fed me Abigail because I loved her like I once loved Beverly. That's..." Will sighs, realizing how awful his words sound. "When you eat someone you love, it saturates the magic inside better. That's why he waited so long to do it - not just hatching a plan, he was waiting for me to become attached to her enough to make her... to make her death as useful as possible for his goal."

Will doesn't know if he now believes Lecter's words that he loved Abigail like his sister, his Mischa. He now doubts everything Hannibal said or did the entire time they knew each other. Had he loved Will at least a little bit? Or did he love the idea of what he could make him into? It pains Grahamson to even think about it, and he lifts a bitter gaze to Matthew, holding his lyre thoughtfully, staring back at him.

Will doesn't want silence; it hurts, it makes him expect the worst, and that's worse even than when that same worst happens. "Don't torture me. Tell me what you think, and be better cruel to me than deceitful, Matthew. I've suffered both of those things, and I know the latter hurts more."

"Did you love him?" Matthew asks. Will expected a verdict, but gets another question that makes him wince.

There's nothing he can't understand if it was done for love, Will realizes. For him, love is the answer to every "why?" and "for what?" because for himself, there is nothing he wouldn't do for love.

Will looks into his clear, calmly expectant eyes and nods, fighting the pain in his chest from the stirring in the fresh wound. "I was his arsoline" he says, honestly and quietly, as if the sounds hurt his sore throat.

He didn't wait for Matthew's response or any other reaction. Will stands up, setting aside his bow and arrow, taking a flask of whiskey from his bag and turning toward the river nearby, and unscrews the lid. The alcohol burns his mouth and throat, helping to partially wash away the sensation of the shards of the broken cup jammed into his body along the length of his esophagus.

Silence covers their sleeping place for long minutes, and then Grahamson hears first the rustle of grass beneath Brown's feet, and then the sound of the lyre and his quiet voice, and he can't help but look at him, as if eager to gaze upon his features warmed by the firelight. He doesn't know what the song is about, doesn't understand enough Ophelian for it yet, but among the unfamiliar sounds he hears *min shahmer,* and realizes that Matthew is singing this quiet, gentle song about him, stepping cautiously closer and closer to him, only half a step away from him before he stops, lifting his gaze from his own fingers on the instrument to Will's blue eyes. His gaze is a gentle touch to the shard of the broken cup of his heart, and the man fears that Brown may inadvertently cut himself, spilling his scarlet blood, the blood of a man, a mortal, before him.

His voice quiets, he clutches the lyre in one hand, shortening the remaining distance between them, and raises his head slightly to reach his prince's lips with his, smiling. Grahamson covers his eyes, kissing back, and Matthew feels the taste of whiskey in his mouth, forgetting his dislike of the drink in that very instant. He loves the taste of it now; he loves anything that

holds even a shadow of an association with Will. The taste of whiskey and fish and berries, the smell of potions that soaked his fingers, the sight of blood and the sound of a knife sharpening. He gathers the man in fragments, reverently folding him into the empty space in his chest that he seemed to have kept unfilled specifically for him all these years. Now his heart is full of flowers and memories, and, ah, how grateful he is that it's bigger on the inside than it is on the outside - he still had so much he wanted to add to it, so many moments to fill that painful void that had been weighing him down all this time, all his life. The feel of his hands on his skin, the beating of his heart as he lay against his chest, the prickliness of his stubble, the pain of his teeth, so sweet, the best in the whole world.

The memory of Will's mark makes him suddenly pull away slightly, smiling brightly, and lift his gaze to the dark starry sky. Grahamson's lips are immediately on his neck, and it tickles, and he laughs, placing his free hand on his head, in his soft curls. "Look" he says, squeezing them lightly with his fingers, and the man raises his head confusedly, looking into his pale face. His heart beats hard in his chest now, and he wants to imprint the young man like this in his memory, for ever.

When Matthew, returning a quick glance at him, seeing that he is not looking where he wants him to, he takes him by the chin and lifts his head, turning it slightly in the direction he wants it to. He raises his hand with the lyre and points to the constellation of the Bite of Heiroz, smiling, happy, as if those stars were now shining just for them, for them alone.

Will thinks of Arson, his confidence, determination, and desperately strong love that could overwhelm the god of that feeling himself. In his delicate musical fingers lurked a power that was beyond the gods' control to tame, he had dared to go against the god of war more than once, forcing the god of love to join him as well. Heiroz didn't stand a chance against him, of course he fell in love, of course he wanted to bind his divine soul to his. The death of this mortal would be unbearable to him, he needed to ensure his eternity in his arms. And so now they were together in the world of the gods, the god of love and the only mortal allowed to tread on the steps to their paradise and did not burn his feet. No wonder Heiroz has so rarely left the land of the gods since his lover's death; had it been his will, he would have spent all eternity in his arms. Will can relate.

Will wonders what will become of them after death. Will they end up in the land of the gods, or in the sky, where great heroes and all those with a drop of divine blood in them have lived, or after all that Grahamson has done, is he destined for the Realm of Darkness? If the latter is true, he's condemned Brown to eternal suffering with one careless bite.

No. He doesn't want to think about it now.

Only after looking up at the sky, Matthew grabs Will's hand with the same smile, pulling him toward the tent, walking backward, unwilling to take his eyes off his lover. "Matemise" he says that night, over and over, alternating only with his name, and Will can't know the translation, but he can feel it with his heart. "Matemise" - and Matthew kisses him as if he were eating ambrosia; "Matemise" - a hot whisper in his ear, a series of incoherent words, pleas, the heat of movement and the noise of skin-to-skin touches. "Matemise," a little louder than the wind as his musical fingers stroke his chest amidst the peacefulness of this night that exists only for the two of them, not even mingling with the birdsong.

I love you, Will thought, and burned himself with those words without even saying them out loud. *I love you like a frozen traveler loves the fire warming his fingertips, like a wanderer in the desert loves the first sip of water from the purest spring. I love you, and it doesn't hurt yet, but it will.*

And I'm scared.

Chapter 5

Will wakes at dawn, but a little later than usual, hearing birdsong and the sound of a lyre outside the tent. The familiar warmth of a gentle body is absent beside him, and only a wreath of flowers lies in Matthew's place. Grahamson frowns slightly, still shrouded in the veil of sleep, sitting up, taking the floral arrangement in his hands carefully so as not to damage it. The lavender and the yellow forsythia are woven together by reverent, delicate hands, tightly bound, and Will examines it thoughtfully from all sides, careful not to crumple the flowers. He doesn't immediately notice the smile on his own face, but when he does, he doesn't try to dismiss the pleasant warmth in his chest that caused it.

Sighing, he places the wreath carefully in his brown curls before leaving the tent. Beside the fire in the green grass lies Matthew, strumming the strings of his lyre looking up into the blue sky without a single cloud, while small blue birds fly nearby picking berries. Brown hears the rustle of Will's footsteps and turns his head to look at him and breaks into a smile, perfectly content, and his warm gaze causes the man himself to soften. "Where's yours?" he asks, walking closer to the fire and noticing the fish he's caught waiting for him.

Matthew sits down, his lower back resting against the tree trunk. "I'm not going to make it for myself. That's narcissistic," he says with a cheerful sparkle in his eyes. Will doesn't say anything back, smiling sleepily at the sound of the lyre, and seems to forget about it. Only when they are about to leave their lodgings does he approach Matthew, who is sitting near the tent, and call out to him; the young man looks up at him, and blinks charmingly and confusedly as Will tucks a flower behind his ear. The blush on his cheeks acts like a love spell on Grahamson, and he feels weak. *This is what falling in love feels like,* he thinks, amazed at how different this tenderness is from what he felt for Hannibal. His love for Lecter was all-consuming, shocking, traumatizing; with him it was as if he was always at risk, always in danger, which fueled the fire in his heart and body. Next to Matthew he feels peace and warmth, and this change is painful to his heart.

He doesn't say anything, only hurries him along, wanting to get to town before dark. Matthew still spends a couple extra moments looking at his reflection in the smooth surface of the water; Will waits patiently.

It grew noticeably colder as they approached the city, and Grahamson's insides felt like they were twisting with tense anticipation. Soon. Maybe only a mere days from now, and he would find himself in the place where Hannibal's childhood had cut short, the place where he was still young and angerless, light as a child, with only the mark as the sole reminder of the possible path he might choose. A place full of ghosts, and Will can only hope it doesn't become his and Matthew's shared grave.

They'll have to get some warm clothes, a thicker blanket, he thought. It will be harder to move, but it will be worth it - the last thing he wants is for their journey to end in the snows of this cold, bleak place.

"Can the weather change that drastically?" Brown asks, more complaining and grumbling than really asking the question.

"It's the cursed lands" Will answers anyway, shrugging his shoulders. "It's only going to get colder. Nirona's punishment for the rebellious nature of the local king" he remembers and sighs.

"There are less birds here" Matthew remarks, sighing, clearly uncomfortable with that realization. "At least there are still hawks. But when we go farther out, there might be frozen water. They won't be able to help us fish anymore."

"Well, I guess I'll manage on my own for a while," Grahamson notes with a smile, glancing back at Brown. The young man smirks.

"I'm sure you will" he says, looking ahead of them again and noticing the piles of snow piled up by the trees, which don't look like the others here anymore, already coniferous. He plucks a handful of berries from a bush, realizing that it'll be fewer and fewer from here on, and holds some out to Will; the man thanks him and pops a couple into his mouth, tucking the rest into a pouch on his belt. He'll give them to Matthew later.

Brown put away his lyre, hiding his hands from the cold creeping closer and closer to them. He had never been to these lands, had never even heard much about them, and now he was to escort his lover to the edge of the land, where the winds were strong, snow was knee-deep year round, and any rivers were covered in a thick layer of merciless ice. There were cold winters where he came from, but he imagined none of them were even close to what happened in the lands cursed by the goddess of nature herself, abandoned by her.

To distract himself from the frosty wind blowing in their faces, Matthew, covering his mouth and nose with a cloth, told Will about his childhood, about the times that still felt warm in his heart, and Grahamson listened to him, absorbing his life story like an artist absorbing paint for a portrait with a brush. Peering occasionally into his face, Brown notices the thoughtful look that often appeared on the man's face as he tried to understand the moods and motives of the man across from him. It made him feel interesting. Worthy to occupy the thoughts in the mind of his beautiful mortal god. His smile hid beneath the fabric, but his eyes sparked with it enough that Will, at times looking at him, could see it and perhaps smile back - his light smile was rarely reflected in his eyes, except with a little more of the softness of the blue lakes. It was only when he laughed, or held back a laugh, that one could see the slight wrinkles in the outer corners of his eyes. Matthew tried to make him laugh more often, to be rewarded for his labors with this beautiful view.

The towns here were poorly guarded, especially on the forest side, and they encountered no guards as they walked through the lightly crunching snow beneath their feet toward a string of houses, some of which had lights burning invitingly warm. Will asks one of the inhabitants for directions, addressing him in the local language that Hannibal had once taught him, and Matthew, standing beside him, looks at him admiringly, smiling. The wreath in his brown hair was covered in a light layer of frost, a couple of petals torn off by the wind, but Brown felt very good knowing that Will, either obliviously or consciously, had not taken it off when he'd entered the town. Almost like wedding rings, and the bite mark on Matthew's pale neck

only screamed louder about their romantic connection. Brown sighed dreamily. Wasn't that all he'd ever asked the gods for?

Young, in love, and seeking revenge on a cannibal living in a distant forest. He's running lines for his legendary song through his head when Will, having learned everything he needs from a passerby, gently leads him in the right direction, touching his elbow for a few moments. "First, we need to sell things at the local exchanger and buy some warm clothes. Then we'll ask for a night's lodging at the tavern" he points with an indefinable wave of his hand toward a three-story building near which a noisy group of men and women were smoking. Matthew nods, eager to follow his lover.

Grahamson understands the foreign language well, but he speaks uncertainly, so he prefers to help himself with gestures. They successfully sell the unwanted items, perhaps not quite for a fair price, but enough to buy warmer clothes and shoes and spend two nights in a local tavern - one now, and one on the way back, assuming they will be lucky. Will feels almost impatient as they move down the cold street to the right building and step inside, immediately surrounded by the noise of the tavern on all sides - an old man playing bagpipes away from everyone, someone in the corner playing cards and drinking beer, two men arguing noisily at the bar while one of the women tries to win their attention. When he and Matthew enter, she seems eager to approach them to butter up one of the strangers for a night with her for a fee, but when she sees the flowers, she immediately loses interest, wrinkling her nose in annoyance. The lovers are hardly worth her effort, and she realizes it.

Grahamson arranges for a room, which the kind-hearted landlord is happy to rent to them, complaining about the small number of guests in town and the perpetually vacant second floor of his establishment, and then turns around to find Matthew grinning as he listens to the music of a bagpipe-playing man. Clutching a key in his frozen hand, Will, after a moment's thought, asks his host about the bath, and he sends his daughter upstairs to get everything ready.

The man takes a glass of whiskey and looks at his companion. Matthew pulls a lyre from his belongings and walks over to the piper, seemingly trying to explain something to him. The latter soon nods with a smile and continues playing, while Brown tries to match his notes by playing the lyre. It turns out weird, but both musicians like it, and no one but Will pays any attention to them anyway.

"You're calorian" suddenly he hears a woman's voice to his right; it turns out to be the same girl he saw before. He flinches. Desperate for company at this early hour, she had apparently decided to try her luck with Will after all. The man doesn't immediately realize she's speaking his language, but when he does, he raises his eyebrows in surprise. "It was the accent that gave you away. It's how the aristocrats from Calorian speak. I know it because my mother was one."

"Your mother was an aristocrat in Calorian?" Grahamson is a little surprised, running a quick glance over the stranger. "How did you end up here?"

"My mother was Anna Lounds," the redhead says, and Will tries to figure out where he's heard that name before. "She had to abandon her family and flee when she was accused of spying for the Northlands" she sighs, shrugging her shoulders. "Well, not that the accusations

were false, but it still sucks. She was hoping to get something in exchange for the information she got, but the local ruler said the deal was to help him conquer some of the warm lands, and he said she failed in her part so he owed her nothing. So now I'm here" she smiles caustically and then drinks her beer. Will looks at her curiously, remembering the story now, the way it looked from the palace. No one wanted another war, no one had any desire to anger the goddess of nature by allowing the locals to take over some of their fertile land. It could have turned into a real disaster, but the northerners didn't care. "I'm Freddie, by the way. And who are you, and how did you end up here, cutie?" she rushes in with questions.

Grahamson decides to be cautious, giving answers more out of politeness. "I am Will. I lived at the court until I fell into the disfavor of the sovereign, and I've been wandering ever since."

The answer is vague, and the redhead presses her lips together a little grudgingly, but decides not to dig in, at least for now. Will holds his glass in his hand so he doesn't accidentally show her his oath scar. "What about your sweet companion?" Freddie nods at Matthew.

He certainly wasn't going to tell the truth about that, certainly not around people who, if Hannibal is to be believed, killed his entire family some thirty years ago simply for the fact that they were witches. He tries to remain calm. "Matt. He... decided to keep me company, that's all."

"Really?" she snorts, rolling her eyes with a smile. "Oh, come on. What did he do that he's now on the run in this godforsaken place, with a calorian and… a lyre?" she chuckles.

Will sighs, looking at Brown. "He stole something" he decides to say to get the girl off his back.

"Yeah? What's that?" Freddie tilts her head sideways, gazing inquisitively into Will's face.

Grahamson drinks the whiskey in a gulp and sets the glass on the bar, turning to her with a smile on his face and theatrically touching his palm to his chest. "My heart" he says, and turns around, heading towards Matthew, placing a hand on his shoulder and distracting him from playing the lyre. "Let's go to the room or they'll start interrogating me, slipping hair pins under my fingernails or even worse" he says in the young man's ear and Brown turns around confused, quickly spotting the redheaded girl at the bar before glancing at Will with a barely contained cheerful smile.

"If you want privacy, you can ask for it outright, no need to make excuses," he purrs playfully, and Grahamson rolls his eyes, pulling away and heading past the bar straight for the stairs, and the young man gestures for the bagpipe player to say goodbye and hurries after him.

The room is small but warm, and the bed is big enough for the two of them. There was a bathtub in the other corner of the room, and steam was rising from it as they passed the tavernkeeper's daughter in the doorway, and Matthew's eyes lit up with enthusiasm.

Will starts to undress, but the young man is at his side, clearly deciding to do it for him. Smirking, he unbuttons and unties his shirt and carefully takes a wreath of his hair before pulling it over his head, placing it on the nightstand beside the bed. Then, taking off his top,

he runs cold fingers over his firm body, causing Grahamson to wince slightly, and smiles. "Sorry. Couldn't resist" he says, finding the ties on his pants with his hands and, looking into Will's eyes, he leisurely unties them, helping him remove his bottoms. The coolness of the room envelops the man and Matthew gently nudges him towards the bathtub. "Don't worry about me, you go first."

"There's plenty of room for two," Grahamson remarks, testing the water with his fingertips before climbing in, exhaling in relief at the blissful warmth that envelops him, closing his eyes and leaning his head back. Matthew grinned, leaning back against the wall, and, after thinking about the offer, decided to follow Will, slowly undressing, feeling the lazy gaze of the man breathing quietly amid the light steam.

It takes a while to get comfortable, but when they do, they both smile, covering their eyes, feeling the skin-to-skin contact through the water. For a few minutes they both just bask, recovering from the local cold, and Will's mind doesn't have a single thought in it, just a blissful emptiness, relaxation, and peace. Matthew's breathing in the silence of their room soothes him, and he opens his eyes only after a while to draw a ladle of water from a nearby basin and pour it gently over Brown's hair; the young man squints but smiles like a contented cat as Will's fingers burrow into his strands, massaging his scalp with the soap the tavernkeeper has provided. He removes the ladle and touches Matthew's slightly protruding ears, massaging them as well, and Brown lets out a quiet satisfied laugh, his palms sliding over the man’s knees sticking out of the water on either side of him. Matthew feels spoiled.

Will's lips touch the back of his head, his neck, the sensitive spot behind his ear, and his arms encircle the young man's waist, one sliding higher to his chest and the other lower, touching his hard cock, and Brown gasps quietly, clutching the sides of the tub, eyes widening. There's little room in the tub and he can't turn around to face his lover, so all he can do is relax, leaning his head back on his shoulder and rubbing against his groin, moaning softly, listening to the splash of water from the quickening movements of his hand. Will whispers softly in his ear, urging him to be quiet so as not to disturb his hosts or embarrass anyone, but he doesn't cover his mouth with his palm, taking too much pleasure from the young man's sobs and moans alone. Matthew winds one hand behind him, clutching Will's strands, pressing lightly closer to the curve of his neck, and Grahamson begins to nibble gently at the tender skin around his mark, bringing Brown to the very edge.

A shiver runs down his legs and he stretches out as far as the bathroom will allow, letting out a sweet sigh of pleasure and cracking a smile. "My fire and stars," he whispers, and Will, smiling, kisses his neck. Matthew bites his lower lip for moments, lying on top of him with his eyes closed, feeling his body beneath his own. "I want..." he pauses, phrasing it differently, "Do you want to be inside me?"

The question echoes with goosebumps down Will's body and penetrates his thoughts. He'd never done this before, Hannibal was usually the one to stretch him and enter his body, making him see flashes and shadows on the ceiling, clawing at his back in a fit of passion and baring his teeth, never, though, ever locking them on another man's skin out of superstitious fear. He knew it would be different with Matthew, the feelings would be different, and he thought about that, but not about himself inside his supple, willing body. The suggestion that flew from the slightly embarrassed young man's lips occupies his thoughts, and his member,

resting against Matthew's thigh with its hardness, almost pines at the idea of the tight warm walls of his lover's body, the heat of his body beneath his own.

He recalls the potion Hannibal used to ease penetration and, stroking Brown's chest, mentally notes that he has all the ingredients in his bag. All he needed to do was mix two potions and that would be enough.

Will exhales heavily into his neck and nods, licking his lips. "In bed" he says and Matthew nods, turning his head slightly to ask for a kiss and Grahamson gladly gives it to him, reveling in the warmth of his mouth and the softness of his lips.

Brown climbs out of the tub, water dripping off him in streams onto the carpet. He takes a towel to wipe some of his skin and hair, and Will looks at his strong, well-built body, which bears only a couple of scars from rare encounters with brigands. The prince lies in the water for a while longer, calming his heart and gathering his thoughts, while Matthew pours some whiskey from a jug, taking a couple of sips. Will guesses he's nervous, probably afraid to ask what it feels like, too embarrassed, having no experience in this kind of intimacy yet. But that doesn't stop him from wanting what he's only heard about before. He just can't quite figure out what he wants. How can you want something you have no idea about? However, Brown has no trouble finding the same answer inside himself as he always has: love.

Will rises from the bathtub, only rinsing the cooling water from the last trace of soap from his hair. He wraps a towel around his hips, as always more shy than his arsoline, and walks over to the supply bags to get the potions he needs. Matthew watches him curiously, sitting on the bed, waiting only for him.

Grahamson decides to take one of the empty vials and pours the ingredients into it one by one; the liquid takes on the right consistency in seconds, and he finally returns his gaze to Brown, who takes another sip of whiskey. Will admires the shade of his eyes, so beautiful in the firelight, and walks over to him, accepting the glass he holds out and drinking the whole thing without breaking eye contact with him.

Matthew is like a sly cat, hiding a smirk behind innocence, or innocence behind a smirk. Will puts the whiskey on the table next to the bottle of lube, and with his freed hands he embraces his face, and the young man gets goosebumps from that simple touch, so warm, so intimate, so close. Will leaned down, covering his lips with his own in a deep, slow kiss that gradually gained momentum, making Matthew's fingers twitch as he reached up to wrap his arms around the man's waist.

Grahamson nudges him in the chest, breaking the kiss, and the young man falls back onto the bed, smiling at how much more comfortable it is than the ground he's slept on for too many nights now. Will climbs in after him, leaning down to begin showering kisses on his neck, his shoulders, his chest, beautifully lit by the light of the fireplace and the moon. His hands slide down his forearms, followed by a trail of kisses until Grahamson finally returns to his lover's lips, kissing him passionately, stoking the fire in his body and heart. Matthew's musical hands find a place on his naked back, and his body heat pleasantly fills him with tenderness mixed with passion. Brown accidentally bites him in the kiss, and Will moans as he pulls away from his mouth, realizing that Matthew hasn't even realized what he's done. He doesn't even let him realize, sliding his warm lips lower on his skin, reaching down to the aroused cock he'd

only touched with his hand before. Will is licking his lips now, opening his mouth and taking the tip inside.

Matthew shudders as if pierced by lightning and covers his mouth with the palm of his hand, suppressing a loud moan in the middle of it. *"Oh God, Will"* he whispers, freezing in place, looking at the man swallowing him deeper and deeper like he's a miracle. His breathing quickens, getting heavier as he feels a wet hot mouth wrapped around his dick and a rough tongue sliding over the most sensitive points of his body. He throws his head back on the pillow, squirming, moving just his lips, dedicating his prayer to Will alone, until he's interrupted by a barely audible whimper as he comes to the very edge, and immediately feels the loss. Grahamson pulls away, leaving him, tense with excitement like a taut lyre string, to grab the previously prepared vial from the table. Matthew clutches the sheets to keep from touching himself, though he wants to, really wants to finish.

He's on fire and he's impatient, and Will notices it, leaning down, kissing his soft skin, stroking his chest with his free hand, almost soothingly, whispering something to the area around his neck before running his palm over his forehead, tucking away damp strands and meeting the young man's gaze. "It's going to be okay. Do you trust me?" Grahamson asks, stroking his face, and Matthew doesn't even think before nodding. His lips are ajar, he's eager, hungry, and Will is going to give him what he wants now so badly it's like it's sparking under his every touch.

He gently spreads his thighs apart, helping him to lie back more comfortably, and pours the lube over his fingers and down his passage, for a while as if to mockingly just lap around the outside, before finally penetrating two phalanges into the hot body willingly taking him in. Matthew tensed for a few moments, but then released himself when Will's free hand took his palm in his own and squeezed, as if grounding him, soothing him with that simple gesture.

A second finger is added to the first almost immediately, and Will thanks the gods for his patience as he takes a long time to work the entrance for himself, watching Matthew's fervor subside a little from the slight pain and the strange sensation of stretching. Taking his palm comfortably, Will brings it closer to his slightly hardened member, setting a slow pace before letting Matthew do it himself, his own hand now stroking his thigh, flexing his fingers inside the sleek, strong body, doing it the way he loved it and trying not to think about who gave him this experience.

When he finds the right spot, Brown responds like a lyre to the tapping of a string. He moans in surprise, his eyebrows rise higher, and he freezes as if struck by a spell until Will strokes his prostate again and again, causing him to breathe heavily and roll his eyes, quietly moaning his name and words in his own language, the translation of which Will doesn't yet know.

He adds a third finger, continuing to knead the young man's body, turning it into a puddle of melting butter, supple and hot.

Grahamson pours the rest of the lube onto his hand and strokes his cock with it. He brings the head right up to Brown's entrance and, looking into his beautiful eyes, trusting, loving, enters him, slowly but mercilessly, full length at once. Matthew opens his mouth silently, as if gasping, and only on the exhale, when Will stops deep inside and strokes his chest with the

palm of his hand, does he let out a low moan that gives the man goosebumps and he responds with a quiet moan himself. Brown grabs his shoulders like a drowning man, and Grahamson presses closer to him, nuzzling his face into his neck, kissing him, making the first movement inside, fascinated and amazed by the sensations in his body. Matthew's fingers clench his muscles, short fingernails scratching his shoulder blades, until Will finds the perfect pace for the both of them, and the young man's hand covers the back of his neck with the tenderness of a lover, burrowing his fingers into the damp soap-scented curls. Will moans softly in his ear, breathing heavily, on emotion, losing his pace, quickening his movements, surrounded by the sound of his name and sobs of pleasure, slapping skin against skin. Matthew, seeing the curve of his neck from his half-closed eyes, brushes his lips against it, kissing it before sinking his teeth into it as if in a trance, causing Will to moan loudly in pain, sweetly mixed with pleasure, pushing him over the edge, forcing him to spill deep inside the body also shuddering from the sudden orgasm.

They breathe heavily as they come to their senses, and Brown stares hazy eyed at the drops of blood, immediately licking them off the man's shoulder, slowly realizing what he had allowed himself to do. He may have to apologize for his insolence to the gods; in any case, even so, he is sure that the god of love will forgive him, and if not him, then his mortal companion surely will. The blood of the descendant of the gods on his tongue feels like ambrosia, empowering him with a strength he feels almost as clearly as the pleasure spilling out of him a moment earlier. He tilts his head to the side, bumping his nose into his curls, and whispers to Will: *min shahmer, min shahmer, min shahmer.*

Grahamson smiles, moving to find his face with his lips, outlining his jaw line with touches first, and only then crushing Matthew's lips like a ripe peach. After a couple moments, he pulls back slightly and his brown curls fall across his forehead as he looks into Brown's rich green eyes with a smile. "Your eyes change color when you're excited. Become... darker, like moss or emeralds" he tells, not daring to take his gaze away from him. The eyes are distracting; how glad he is to be distracted by those very eyes.

"Sounds awfully magical" Matthew replies quietly in tone, smiling tiredly. "They might give me away. The eyes are more noticeable than a mark you can hide under your clothes. If anyone sees them, they'll try to kill me in an instant" there is no fear in him when he says this, and his lips curve into a charming smirk. "Perhaps I should hide them behind glasses or use a hood."

"No," Will replies, running his palm over his cheek. "I don't have many pleasures in my life, don't deprive me of this one too" he says and Brown blurs into a smile, grinning, perfectly content to stroke the man's scraped shoulder blades. "And if anyone tries to kill you, they'll have to fight a descendant of the gods first."

Matthew laughs, leaning his head back on the pillow, and Grahamson smiles, kissing the exposed neck with the bite mark on it; it hasn't gone away, confirming his hunches by remaining perfect, frozen in time like a signature chiseled in marble. Will decides to accept the fact that he will now drag this birder with him wherever the fates and gods send him, before death and after. He has no regrets. It's too late for this anyway.

Chapter 6

They leave their lodging early in the morning, dressed in warm clothes and taking some supplies. While Will negotiates something with the tavernkeeper, Matthew stands at the exit, looking at Dimmond's ring on his finger, the stone in it a beautiful shimmering blue-green, and the blue grew brighter the closer Grahamson got to him. Brown thinks with a smile at the thought that it might prove useful on their journey, giving him some sort of reassurance every time he lowers his gaze to it - the swirls of the two bright colors twist in a maelstrom as if they were about to mingle into one turquoise, but it still doesn't happen. It amuses him, helping to brighten the wait, and he only removes his hand when Will finally comes up to him and says they're ready to go.

Matthew smirks, reaching up to his neck to adjust his scarf, while at the same time as if accidentally touching the bite - two scarlet dots like a scar carved into the stone of his god's body. Grahamson looks away awkwardly, and it's as if Brown is trying to wipe away the slight blush on his cheek with his thumb, causing the man to roll his eyes. It was at times like this that he suddenly remembered with mild surprise that Will was only a year or two older than he was. The stubble made his face more expressive and mature, skillfully hiding the youthful lightness, the spring in his body that only rarely showed through all those layers of mental and physical armor, and only to a chosen few. Matthew pats him on the shoulder a couple of times, heading out with his lover.

The farther north they go, the harsher the weather becomes. The lyre ends up in his bag pretty quickly, and Brown hides his fingers in his pockets in an attempt to keep them warm; at one point the wind gets stronger, and they cover the lower half of their faces with scarves and stop talking. Matthew tries to amuse himself by watching the formation of frost and snow in Will's brown hair, but suddenly feels within himself a desire to warm him better, so he stops him and puts his hat on the man's head, smiling and taking no objection. He assures him that he is more resistant to the cold because he lived in the northwest. It wasn't completely true actually, he was always terribly cold, but he just really wanted to help Will in any way he could.

At some point they reach the first houses covered in snow, clearly not lived in for a long time. They decide to stop at one of them for a while to warm up a bit and eat, and make their way inside through the back, shoveling the snow to get to it. Already inside, they realize that even though there's no wind, the house is frozen through, and frost has settled on the walls. Will takes off his hat, returning it to Brown, whose ears are reddening from the cold, and starts looking for a fireplace or something else to light. There is expectedly no wood, and they have to grab books from the shelf to make some fire, but even with a firebox like this, it proves impossible. Will tries in vain to get a spark, looking tense and focused, and then Matthew, smiling weakly, walks over to him, pulling his hand out of his pocket and running his thumb over the tips of the other fingers, hoping to get a light flame that would be enough to start a fire, but all of a sudden his hand seems to burst into flames and a blazing fire the size of a large bird appears above his palm, and he is surprised by it, and in a slight panic he quickly clenches his palm, forcing the fire to go away. He and Will look at each other in silence with incomprehension.

"What the..." Matthew frowns in surprise, looking down at his palm.

"Do it again!" Grahamson says enthusiastically, freezing to the bone even in his warm clothes, and Brown nods hastily, repeating his gesture with more care, and again the bright fire flares in his palm, and he stares at it like a mesmerized child, like when he first managed to do it as a young boy. When he comes back to his senses, he leans over, lighting a fire of books, and they finally begin to warm them; he doesn't put out the fire in his palm, feeling the heat from it as well, and he and Will stare at his power as if mesmerized.

Matthew can't help but wonder how this is even possible, what happened that made it possible, and he turns his gaze to the man's scarf-covered neck. He remembers the taste of his blood on his tongue, all those feelings that came over him in a warm wave in an instant; he felt strong, powerful. It was a conjecture both frightening and delightful at the same time. After a while, he still clenches his palm, leaving only smoke from his fire, and looks at Will as if expecting something from him, but he doesn't know what to say, how to explain it.

Fortunately, Grahamson reads his facial expression well and puts two plus two together in his head too. He touches the bite mark on his neck with warmed fingers, looking at the flames before thinking about it, and then still looks at the young man again. "It's because of the bite" he voices what they were both thinking. "Fluria's divine blood. Of course," he sighs, shaking his head with a faint smile - he could have realized everything earlier when he saw Matthew's emerald eyes. Silence hangs between them for a while, and Will tries to figure out what to make of it, whether there's any danger to be expected, and how long the effect will last. Eventually he sighs and looks at Matthew with a smile. "Well, I hope it doesn't have any side effects" he says and Brown snorts in relief, rolling his eyes.

"Don't worry, I'm not going to use you as a mana recovery cocktail" Matthew jokes and Will laughs, shaking his head. The awkwardness remains, but it's light, pleasant, and it soon passes, too, when they finally make themselves some food and eat, warmed by the fire of the fireplace. Before they leave, they take a couple sips of a warming potion that would help them better withstand the cold for a while, and head further out over high drifts and slippery ice, walking over which they have to hold hands to keep from falling and breaking limbs. Matthew is enjoying this, not hiding it at all, while Will is trying to stay focused and calm - the closer he got to the towering manor behind the high gates in the distance, the darker he grew, wondering what he'd find there, and whether he'd find anything at all, whether this journey had been in vain. Matthew suddenly slips, falling and taking Grahamson with him, who falls on top of him, palms resting on the ice on either side of Brown's face, which wrinkles in pain for a few moments before opening his eyes and seeing his beloved a few millimeters away from him and cracking into a stupid smile. Will presses his lips together, but then gives in and leans down, giving him a gentle kiss that seems to warm them for a moment, and then pulls away, lifting the handkerchief that had fallen down his chin and standing up to give him a hand. Matthew readily takes it and rises to his feet following, looking into his blue eyes with a hint of a satisfied smirk in his light green streams.

Grahamson shakes his head. No, even if they don't find or learn anything, Will thinks, it was all for a reason anyway. Maybe sometimes there's nothing wrong with veering off the main path for a bit, if the reward is really worth it.

As they got closer and closer to the gate, it grew darker, and it was clear that they would have to spend the night in Hannibal's old house. The thought was troubling Will, and he stared at the silhouette of the stone, snow-covered building, frowning and concentrating, and then stopped as if pinned to the ground, his lips tightening as he stared at the gilded letters glinting in the semi-darkness - Lecter - and the symbol of a snake pierced by an arrow. Matthew stops beside him, too, hesitant to make a sound, but looking not at the gate but at Will, as if trying to understand what he's feeling, what he's thinking. He's always found empathy of this kind too difficult, too overwhelming. He only hopes he's doing the right thing when he comes closer, meeting his gaze, not daring to touch his cold skin, suppressing the urge to brush away the curl swaying in the wind.

Will lowered his gaze, stepping forward and trying to open the gate; Matthew helped him, the heat of the fire blasting the frozen mechanism, and with a creak that scared away the birds, they entered the grounds, wandering down the long, straight path to the door, and gradually Grahamson's face darkened into a frown as he realized that the path had been cleared, not perfectly, but enough to allow them to walk without fear of getting one foot stuck in a snowdrift. Someone cared about this place. Someone has been here.

Will pulls out the knife cautiously, continuing to move forward, reflexively leaning ahead of Matthew so he's a little behind, and Brown obediently follows, looking around warily until suddenly he himself frowns, reaching out and stopping Grahamson abruptly, taking him by the forearm. When he turns around, Matthew touches a finger to his lips to keep him quiet while he looks around and after a couple of moments he whistles slightly, trying to find birds with his gaze, and one finally, hearing his call, flies up, landing on his outstretched arm. Matthew must be saying something to it, asking for something, when suddenly they hear a sound that no one has time to react to - a bowstring taut, a quick arrow flying, hitting the distracted hawk.

Brown bounces away in fright, looking at the bird that has fallen dead at their feet, and Will reflexively puts his hand on his chest, as if to stop him from approaching it, while he looks around quickly, trying to find the shooter, and it's not hard to do - a young woman stands a few meters away with a bow and arrow aimed at them. The bottom of her black coat wriggles in the wind, as does her dark, wavy hair, and she stares at them with the coldness of the local people, gradually moving closer, keeping her gaze fixed on them and the arrow ready to fly.

Matthew's lips tighten as he stares at the dead bird and he clenches his fists to hold back the anger building inside him, only Will standing too close stops him from using his newfound magic.

Grahamson hides the knife and raises his hands to demonstrate the purity of his intentions. After thinking for a moment, he decides to speak in the language Hannibal taught him. *"We're not here to hurt anyone."*

"Then why are you here?" the girl asks, her voice calm, as if she is not afraid of them. Maybe she really isn't.

Will thinks about an answer. He's not sure if he knows the right words, so he says simply, *"Hannibal."*

The name makes the girl gradually approaching them freeze like an ice statue. Her dark eyes - like Hannibal's, Will thinks, and regrets the thought instantly - are fixed on him, as if trying to see something special in them, hidden beneath the mask. "Why?" she asks in calorian, recognizing Grahamson's clumsy accent.

Will exhales, slowly lowering his hands. "I need to know him" he replies after a pause.

"Why do you need to know Hannibal Lecter?"

"He took something from me. I want to understand why."

It sounds almost petty, but he doesn't know how else to explain his motives - they were written in the language of the gods on his ribs, impossible to voice. And yet, something his words do to the unfamiliar woman, and she lowers her bow, blinking, and her gaze changes to a cautiously curious one, as if she doesn't trust her own hunch. She remains silent, shifting her gaze to Matthew, who tensely looks at her with a dose of hostility, and then still tucks the weapon behind her back as she approaches them; Will reflexively takes half a step back, but the girl only picks up the fallen bird, removing the arrow from it and heading for the house. "Follow me" she says, passing them and opening the door of the house. They have no choice but to obediently follow her.

The dark, half-empty hallways, filled with old furniture and paintings, some of which are damaged but still hanging in their places, give a somewhat oppressive impression, as does the whole place. The girl walks confidently into the kitchen, where she lights the lamp, placing the carcass of a bird on the cutting table; Matthew wrinkles his nose in irritation, sighing and turning away toward the window. Will says nothing, watching the stranger's actions.

"My name is Chiyoh," she says, continuing to work on preparing dinner. "I was the maid’s daughter in the Lecter’s family" her accent makes her speech sound as if she is cautiously stepping over traps placed on the ground. "And the daughter of the father of that family" Chiyoh adds and Matthew turns to look at her, lowering his gaze the next moment to his ring, which shines three colors - green, blue, and white like the snow.

"You wear the mark" he says, and they both turn to look at him; Will guesses as well, and Chiyoh nods silently, looking him over. After thinking about it, Brown decides to run his thumb over the tips of the other fingers, causing fire, and the girl freezes looking at it before, after thinking about her actions, with a slight sweep of her hand freezes the window Matthew is standing by and it becomes covered in patterns of frost. "Wow," Brown touches it with his fingertips, smiling like a child.

The girl lowers her gaze, continuing to quietly work on her dinner. "How do you know Hannibal?"

Will exhales quietly, sitting back in his chair. "One would argue, intimately," he replies. "I'm Will. Exiled Prince of Calorian" Grahamson says, and Chiyoh raises a gaze of a fawn pierced by an arrow.

She places the knife on the table with a slight clatter, keeping her eyes on him, and he sees her take a small exhale, pressing her cold, pale lips together. She swallows, lowering her

gaze, seeming to force herself to calm and collect herself, and he frowns at the metamorphosis in her face, but Chiyoh, as if sensing it, turns away, opening a drawer, pulling out a bottle of wine and three glasses, which she wipes clean with a rag.

Will looks over to Matthew, feeling a slight tension due to the reticence the woman has brought to this conversation.

"He made you eat someone you cared about" she says, and Grahamson straightens up, struck by her precise words like with an arrow.

"Yes" he says quietly, like the flap of a bird's wing in the night.

Chiyoh slowly turns to him, looking like a willow tree, graceful, calm. "He made a mistake" her voice is calm. "It was the wrong person. Otherwise you wouldn't be here now. And neither would I" she says confidently, and shifts her gaze to Matthew, looking like she knows something about him that no one else does, and it makes her features a little more wistful for a moment before her coldness returns to her.

"What do you mean?" Will asks, frowning.

The girl ponders for a moment before deciding whether or not to answer. Finally she lowers her gaze, a dark strand falling across her face as she pours wine into one glass after another. "When we were children, the goddess of death and darkness gave Hannibal and his family a prophecy. And he will one day be born with special blood flowing through him, and he will be banished from his homeland, and he will gain the power to reverse the forces in the mortal world, to lift the curse from the northern lands and release magic from the realm of darkness that will spread from edge to edge of the map, from mountains to lowlands, from rivers to volcanoes, and the dead will join the living, for there will be no death" she says quietly and then sets the bottle on the table without raising a glance at any of her guests.

Will doesn't hear the silence, instead there's a disturbing ringing in his head; he feels a suffocation inside him, straightening up in his chair as if he's swallowed a red-hot poker whole. *Prophecy,* he thinks. Hannibal wanted to fulfill the prophecy his family was told about by the goddess of darkness, the founder of William's family, because it's what he believes he must do to see his kin again, and he killed Abigail because if all is fulfilled, the dead will join the living. Death is illusory to him in the light he sees from the other side. Grahamson feels a shiver of fear in his body because he realizes, he feels, that the gods are *lying,* that this will turn to chaos in the earth, strife worse than during the days of the founding, and he lifts his gaze from the table to the girl, realizing that she must have left something out, an understatement, for something in this story was missing.

"What else was said in that prophecy?" he asks, and she remains silent, but he does not give up, leaning over the table to look up into her eyes from below, continuing to press for an answer; it seems to Will that if he does not find out he will make some fatal mistake, and that he will make the same if he does, but he cannot bear the lingering expectation of the inevitable. "You said he was wrong, that Abigail was the wrong person. What did you mean by that?"

She lifts her gaze, looking into his dim lamp-lit, anxious face. "And he shall gain strength when he swallows the one dear to his heart, silencing the song of the bird for ever" she quotes quietly, and her voice is the rustle of leaves in the wind, but the words feel like a hand clutching his throat, a knife pressing into his belly, cutting him open, exposing him to agony and sending a painful shiver through his body. He's afraid to look at Matthew, but he feels the young man looking at him. It's as if everything freezes, he holds his breath in dull fear. A moment, another, and Brown walks quietly, slowly out of the kitchen, and Will turns around to look at his lowered head and tense shoulders. He can't see his face, but he can feel his emotions - he keeps himself from crying.

He doesn't go after him right away, afraid he can't find the right words to comfort him right now. Matthew is a taut string at the moment. Let go and there's a loud sound; keep holding and pulling and it risks breaking. Will searches his burning mind for fragments of thoughts and feelings, his hand clenched on the hilt of his sword, remembering Hannibal, remembering Abigail, remembering Beverly, remembering Matthew. He looks at the bird, soon to become Chiyoh's dinner, and the echo of a woman's voice echoes in his head, the song of the bird silenced forever. The flowers in his heart and lungs feel as if they are turning into a dozen small stones, and he raises his gaze, looking at the lady of the manor. "Is there any way to avoid the fulfillment of the prophecy?" he asks, looking into the girl's eyes, ready to catch every lie and truth she tells, opening his mirror fully, not daring to take his gaze away from her brown eyes for a moment.

She flinches like a fly caught in a spider's web and swallows, trying not to show anything, but her emotions and feelings are visible through the thin layer of frost she has covered her human shell with. Empathy, Heiroz's gift, comes to his aid, not letting her keep silent even though a part of her really wants to. "Fluria made it clear that Hannibal must survive at all costs so that the prophecy could be fulfilled" she says. "If he died, nothing could happen. That's why he..." Chiyoh hesitates, lowering her gaze for a moment, pursing her lips.

"What?" Will nudges her.

"That's why he ate Mischa," she continues, looking into his blue eyes again, and Grahamson feels seasick from realizing the new facets of lies and truth in their relationship with Hannibal. "He knew what lay on his plate. The sorcerer told him before he killed her, he asked him. And Hannibal ate her. Because he needed the strength to survive and escape. He ate the sorcerer, too. I thought he would eat me as well, but he left me. Here. Alone. Because he didn't love me. Was sure my flesh wouldn't make him stronger, that I wasn't worth it. He didn't think I was family" she says, lowering her gaze to the glass in her hands. "That's the only thing that saved me."

Will feels the shards of the cup in his chest being ripped out with tongs only to find themselves shoved into his muscles in a new order in the next instant. He sees Hannibal now more clearly and distinctly than ever - a young man who had lost his parents, who saw his only hope in getting them back, who was fixated on the past, on ghosts, blindly wandering down the path pointed out by the Goddess of Darkness who could fool everyone, cheat, she was a goddess, she made no oaths to always be honest. And now he was walking down that road, not taking the murder seriously, convincing himself that at the end of the path everyone would return. His parents. Mischa. Abigail.

He remembered the way Hannibal had looked at him when they'd been so close together in his kitchen, bleeding. He wanted me to kill him, Will realizes. He wanted me to eat him. If I had, the prophecy would have happened, but I escaped. And now he'll do anything to get me back; he must not have done it yet just because he was waiting, waiting for me to fall in love with someone, which is why he hasn't been following me around this whole time. Matthew and I are only still alive because he's waiting for our love to grow enough for me to eat him and do Fluria's will. And he won't stop as long as the blood runs in his veins, he will be the destructive force that will leave nothing in my life, he will fight to the end because he's already gone too far. The only way to end this is to kill him, giving him the reunion with his family that he has longed for his whole life.

"Thank you for telling the truth" Will says without looking at her, getting up from his chair, intending to find Matthew, when suddenly the girl stops him:

"This young man" she says and he looks at her, *"do you feel a stab of hunger for him and find nourishment in the very sight of him?"* she asks in her own language, but Will only understands snippets of phrases, missing the meaning and their coherence.

"I'm sorry, I don't understand."

Chiyoh nods slowly. "It's a phrase the northerners use when talking about deep feelings for a person, similar to addiction and desperate love that can't be satiated" she explains. "Without which one feels incomplete, like without a severed limb."

Will feels bad. He's honest:

"I don't know."

The girl nods and smiles softly. "Then you still have time. You don't love him enough for their design. Not yet."

You don't love him enough, echoes in his heart, like someone pulling out a shard and putting it back in place. He says nothing, dark thoughts creeping into his head, feigning hope - maybe he can save him by letting him go, by denying him? But it's too late to think about that, he realizes immediately, stepping out of the kitchen and touching his neck hidden by the scarf. They are bound. The Goddess of Darkness is playing a game against them, and the God of Love is playing along like an old acquaintance. Will has a scream in his chest that he can't let out because he's afraid that if he starts screaming, he won't be able to stop.

He finds Matthew by the fireplace at the other end of the floor. He sits on the ground, staring at the flames that don't hurt his skin, even when he's reaching into the heart of the fire with his hand. His gaze is pensive and his face is sad, and his lips don't move - he's not praying.

Will exhales quietly and, unraveling his scarf, places it next to his, lying on the back of one of the couches. He slowly walks over to Brown, lowering himself next to him, his knee touching his.

"Ma thew" he says, a name and an apology.

The young man only shakes his head in response and smiles faintly. "Turo, min shahmer" the voice is quiet and almost lost in the crackle of the logs. "It is not your will. It is the will of the gods."

"No," Will says, "it is the will of a goddess. One of them. The goddess of Darkness and Death. Do you pray to her, do you honor her?"

"No."

"No," Grahamson nods. "We are not doomed. There is a way to avoid it. I don't want to be a god, Matthew" he looks into his face, and Brown finally shifts his gaze from the fire to him. "And I don't want to play their games, to be a piece, a pawn that they use to devour later. I want peace, remember?"

"When did the gods care what the humans wanted?" he asks, and Will can see the frown crease between his brows, the tension and darkness in his bright eyes. "Will, they'll leave us no choice, they'll leave you no choice. They will do everything in their power to get what they want" Matthew's voice is louder than usual and he clenches his fists, fighting himself, but the fire in his features quickly dies out and he turns away, not looking at Grahamson again, as if afraid to wound him with the arrows of his anger at fate, the prophecy, the gods. "Maybe it would be better if you never fell in love with me."

"Matthew..." Will frowns, wanting to say something else, but Brown interrupts him in a calm voice, and there's coldness in his features.

"Don't make a fool of me, Will" he says, looking at the tongues of flame caressing the timbers. "You worry about me, care for me, but I am merely a glass of water with which thou quenches your thirst. A fantasy to be touched. It's okay; you've known me for a couple days. Love is a feeling too strong and deep to come to two people at once. Heiroz didn't fall in love with Arson the moment they met, but when he realized that his world wasn't full of flowers and colors, that his soul was withering without him. It took years." Matthew smiles crookedly, lowering his gaze to his hand, stoking the fire in it. "But maybe it would be better if that love never came to you. Because then it will be unavoidable, and then what peace will your soul have? Only fire and tears" he looks at Will again, the determination in his gaze reflected in the darkness of the spruce irises. "I can make it so that you will never love me. And you can escape the prophecy, find your peace."

"I can't" Grahamson smiles weakly at the look on his face; he's so funny, touching now, willing to do anything stupid, even break his own heart by himself. Silly. The man reaches out and touches his neck gently, tenderly, and Matthew flinches as the cold fingers slide over the bite mark; he looks at him with the gaze of a tame dog. "It was like instinct. Intuitive. Perhaps Heiroz pushed me to do it - it doesn't matter. Now and from now on, I will drag you with me wherever I find myself, in life and in death. I don't know if those places will be bad or good; probably bad. Either way, the least I can do for you is to love you past my pride. I'm not worried about the prophecy" he removes his hand and lowers his gaze, smiling weakly. "This may surprise you, but even if you die, I won't have much trouble not eating you."

"You can't know that."

"How long ago did you start doubting me?"

This elicits a nervous chuckle from Matthew, and he stares at the fire again, lips pressed together, pondering Will's words. Silence hangs for a while, and only the crackling of the fireplace can be heard.

"When I die, burn me," Brown says. "Don't wait a day. I don't need rituals. Don't need flowers, signs on my body. Fire is enough."

They stare at each other in silence; Will wants to object, to say that it's too early to think about death, or that without rituals Matthew's soul might not be allowed into the world of the dead, that he will have to wander the earth in spirit for eternity, wailing in pain and cold among the vast forests, unseen by anyone, not even the birds. Brown doesn't let him say it, stopping him with a glance and a timid touch to his neck; warm hands stroke the bite mark, and a quiet, barely perceptible smile appears on the young man's lips, lit by the fire.

"Burn me, min shahmer," he says. "You will find your chance for a peaceful life. And I will find peace when death takes you, and my soul will follow you wherever it may take you. Promise me."

Will could have said that Matthew wouldn't have to wander alone for long, that he himself would surely die young, soon after the young man - they would be drawn to each other, and there was nothing either of them could do about it. Will could have said that he couldn't be so cruel to him, that he would perform the rituals, even if risking every moment of hesitation, just to get a chance to give Brown at least a couple years in a good place instead of the darkness into which they were certain to fall after all Will had done. He could say a lot of things, but chooses to leave them in his head, unspoken, and only nods, moving closer to him for the kiss that seals the quiet promise.

Chapter 7

They spend the night at the manor house. Chiyoh offers them dinner, but Matthew doesn't eat the birds, and Will decides not to either, and they eat what they have left over from lunch, having cooked it themselves. They don't turn down the wine that warms them though, and then go to bed, huddled together under one of the blankets, arms and legs tangled together like the threads of a sea knot, warming each other with the warmth of their bodies.

They no longer discuss the prophecy, no longer talk about what they will do next. Will thinks about it, thinks about Hannibal, about the idea of killing him, for their sake and for the sorcerer's own, but it seems too dangerous, and he's afraid of putting both himself and Matthew in grave danger. Lecter is powerful, and there's nothing that can stop him, even if Will begs him on his knees, pleading for sanity. He's too far gone and too proud to admit the wrong path he's taken. Only blood can wash away his pride.

At dawn they eat breakfast and depart, leaving Chiyoh in her fortress, where Hannibal left her, frozen like a statue, a weeping willow. The cold burns their bodies, and the potion does not warm them well; Matthew summons his fire to ease their way through the snows, melting it, making a path, walking quickly toward the town. Occasionally, as they walk across the ice, he takes Will's hand, and the man feels the hot warmth of his palm, saving his fingers from frostbite. Grahamson ponders how much stronger the divine blood has made him, and whether it could lead to something bad. His thoughts grow darker and darker, and he tries desperately to push them away from himself, focusing on the road, on the warmth of the tavern awaiting them.

Brown stops suddenly, grabbing his elbow to slow him down, and frowns tensely as he looks at his hand; Will lowers his gaze, realizing immediately what has alarmed him - there is a new color in the stone of his ring, orange, and it's growing larger with each passing second. Grahamson draws his sword, looking around, but it's snowing in such large and frequent flakes that visibility is almost nil. He holds Matthew's hand, feeling it heat up, summoning his fire - he has no one to hide in front of here. They hear some kind of growl, like the roar of an animal, a wild wolf or a bear; Will turns around, sword in front of him, ready to fight anyone who dares approach, but the enemy, whoever it is, is more cunning, stronger, faster, attacking from the side, tossing Brown aside like a useless toy to pounce on Grahamson, who has lost his balance from the blow. Looking up, Will manages to see a man with a mouth full of sharp teeth and eyes like an animal's, wild, angry. It looks as if it is ready to tear its prey apart, snarling at the prince, and the man thrusts his sword forward, but it fails to penetrate the tough skin and steel bones of the nearly naked man, and Grahamson can only desperately restrain it by the neck, preventing the strong creature with the wolf mark on its chest from gnawing at his throat.

Matthew, up from the ice, watches it in painful consternation, frozen in shock at the power of the familiar, until a shiver runs through his body and he feels the fire of anger inside him, the fire of wanting to protect his man, protect at all costs. When he sees the splatter of blood - the creature has scratched Will's face - he can no longer stand still. Pierced by fear for his lover, fear that drives, motivates him, he lets out a snarl, pouncing on the wolf-man as if ready to

tear him apart himself with his teeth. He doesn't immediately sense something behind him, and even when the sensation registers in him, he doesn't pay it any mind. Black raven wings unfold behind his back, engulfed in holy fire that cannot be extinguished, and he grabs the familiar firmly by his bare shoulders, tossing him aside and then, without giving him a moment to gather himself, attacks him himself, hard fists battering his face, striking again and again, ignoring his claws on his body, tearing his clothes, leaving deep scratches, scarring his chest, continuing to punch and punch and punch and punch, and his fists catch fire and the creature beneath him screams, agonized by the burns eating away at his tough, inhuman skin, and finally lets out a death whimper before collapsing, dropping his arms. Matthew continues to beat him, not yet satisfied, completely ignoring the lack of resistance and the hot blood running down his own chest from the deep wounds; his eyes go dark and he doesn't realize when he stops striking, losing all power to move, falling to the snow melted by his fire, exposing the bare, unplowed earth. His wings leave an imprint before disappearing as if burned to the ground and he closes his eyes, losing consciousness.

Will, stunned by the spectacle of the fight, rises on trembling legs in the resulting silence, waddling past the defeated familiar, probably sent by Hannibal, and looks with rounded eyes at Matthew, pale, rapidly freezing on the cold ground, stained with his own and other men's blood, and Grahamson calls his name, sinking down beside him, touching his forehead, his neck, trying to feel for a pulse on his wrist, which is faint, almost insensible. The cold winds intensify, the snow rapidly covers the ground, which has melted under the heat of the young man's body, and Will, realizing that in another minute they will be covered with snow, creating a grave for the two of them, takes Brown's body, looking around for the nearest shelter, and drags him, almost breathless, to the small wooden house where they had waited out the blizzard before. Matthew is heavy, and Grahamson pulls as hard as he can to hide with him as quickly as possible from the icy wind behind the walls of the frozen house. Without Brown's fire, the place is as cold as a crypt.

Laying him down on the carpet, sitting beside him, resting his head in his lap, touching his cold face in panic, Will looks back to his bag, quickly pulling out all his potions, finding what he needs and helping Matthew, conscious but too weak to drink, taking every last drop. He speaks to him as if trying to comfort him, but his voice is not Arson's, and it cannot take away all the pain, all the terrible weakness that has overtaken the bleeding young man's body. Grahamson takes another potion, tossing aside Brown's torn clothes, beginning to pour it over the wounds, and Matthew can only mewl in pain, throwing his head back, feeling the soothing palm of the prince's hand on his neck. Finished, Will wraps his palms around his face, stroking it, not thinking at all of his own scars, blood dripping down Brown's cheek, his eyelids clenched shut from the pain, which is not relieved by the potions or the touches until he passes out again, leaving Will alone with his fear.

Grahamson grabs an old blanket from the bed nearby to wrap the young man in it, cradling him in his embrace, wrapping his arms tightly around him from the back, whispering in his ear whatever comes into his head, soothing himself rather than the unconscious young man. He's cold. He's terribly cold, and Will is scared to death.

Even when the blood stops flowing from his wounds, he still doesn't come to his senses. The man tries in vain to give him his warmth, staring out the window at the howling blizzard outside, and can think of nothing better to do than swallow his pride and turn to someone he

has never appreciated in his life. He covers his eyes, speaking to Heiroz with just his lips, begging him to save Matthew, to give him the strength to survive this. *He worshipped you, only you,* he reminds the silent god of love. *He was overflowing with love like with flowers, and it was you who did this to him, you made him fall in love with me, condemned him to all this suffering; how dare you take him away from me so soon after this? Has he not honored you enough in his life? Would you let your Arson perish so easily? I'm bound to him, he's bound to me, it can't be broken, you of all should understand that. How can you take him away when my feelings for him have just begun to sprout inside my shrapnel-wounded heart? I'm asking you to give him a chance. Please, please, please. Take me. I'm doomed. Take me, he doesn't deserve it, he hasn't done anything wrong in his life, he's suffered enough. Take my blood in exchange for his, satiate yourself with it like....*

His lips stop moving as a drop of scarlet blood from his face lands on the young man's shoulder, and suddenly it reaches him, a thought, an idea like lightning piercing through his body. He remembers the power his blood had given Matthew, just a few drops of it, and realizes that this could be their last chance. He grabs his hunting knife in the heat of emotion and looks into Brown's pale face, tilted to the side, at his cold lips, and decides to slash his palm, changing the sworn scar of kings into a new, sworn scar of love. A hot pain shoots through him, and he tenses, looking at Matthew again, and gently brings his hand to his lips, whispering his name, trying to call out to him, bring him a little to his senses.

As soon as the first drop hits his tongue, he flinches, like a ravenous man seeing a richly set table of food in front of him, and after a couple of moments he begins to drink his blood greedily, unconsciously yet, and Will presses his lips together, enduring as Matthew's tongue passionately licks the divine blood flowing from his body, eyes open and rolling in a fit of euphoria that floods every cell of his body with hot warmth, life, love. Grahamson watches it as if through a veil, afraid to stop him until he himself begins to feel the acrid weakness from blood loss and pulls away the hand that Matthew reflexively tries not to let go until the last possible moment. Only the sound of his name brings him out of his trance and he lets go, wide open bright dark green eyes, staring into the void, breathing heavily as if he's run several miles. Will stares at his face, at his blood-stained mouth, at his tongue running across his lips in an attempt to steal the last drops of life-giving moisture, and it's mesmerizing. He exhales heavily, relieved to see him, alive, breathing, warming in his arms.

The awakened young man's gaze runs over his surroundings until he comes upon his lover's face, and immediately he reaches for it, and Will doesn't deny him a kiss. He feels his own blood in his mouth, the hot warmth of his lips, the touch of his burning palms against his cheeks. Pulling away, they look into each other's eyes, and Matthew slides his gaze smoothly down to the scars of the familiars' claws, running a fingertip over them before moving forward again and licking the maroon trails, and Will laughs softly, weakly, after a few moments, still forcing Brown to finish the feast by pulling him away from him by his short black curls. They look into each other's eyes again, and Matthew, covered in blood, smiles, his eyes sparkling like emeralds.

"Are you cold?" Brown asks quietly, seeming to come fully to his senses, and doesn't wait for an answer, taking his hand aside, immediately igniting, warming the whole room with his heat, and Will even reflexively flinches, pulling away, looking at him, gradually calming down after everything he's been through, and then gently drops Matthew's hand, forcing him

to put out the fire, and hides his face in his neck, tired, exhausted. Brown smiles, licking his lips still intermittently, his free arm around Will's waist, stroking his back.

Will places a hand on his bare chest, fumbling for the wounds that have healed, leaving only scars that are slightly palpable on his hot skin. "Your clothes are torn. I'll at least give you my shirt."

"Nonsense. I'll be fine. You can feel it, can't you?" he covers his palm on his skin with his hand and smiles. "It's okay. You've already given me enough, min shahmer" Brown says and then takes his hand, cut for him, and sighs, bringing it up to his face, but only to shower the scar with soft kisses like he once showered the statue at the entrance to the temple of the god of love.

While the blizzard outside the door gradually calms down, as if the goddess of nature is showing them compassion, Matthew handles the remnants of the potion and wraps a cloth around Will's palm, and then the man helps him wash away the residue of blood from his face, but Brown keeps preventing him from doing so, too eager to kiss him, pitching forward now and then, stealing a few moments of touching his soft lips, and Grahamson was too worried about him a few minutes ago to reject him; he wants to kiss him himself, so hot, so alive. Brown's hands touch his neck, his face, his fingers burrow into his hair, and he's so warm, and Will finally gives in, tilting his head back, letting his sensitive neck fall under his kisses, letting him get his palms under his clothes. He feels engulfed, safe, and lets out a barely audible moan as Brown wraps his palm around his cock, pulling his pants down a bit. The contrast of the coldness of the room and the hot skin is maddening, and then Matthew moves lower down his body, wrapping his lips around his hardness, letting it into his hot mouth, warming it, coating it with touches of his tongue, making Will jerk and gulp for air with his mouth. Hot palms move up his body, never leaving his skin for a moment, and Grahamson feels hot until he suddenly cries out softly, teeth clenched, pouring deep into Brown's throat as if marking him from the inside, and the young man swallows every last drop without delay, as if he couldn't think of anything else.

Pulling away, he hurriedly pulls his pants back on Will, sliding his kisses higher on his skin until he reaches his neck, sliding his tongue over the bite mark there, feeling Grahamson's arms around his shoulders to pull him higher and draw him into a long kiss that drags on for long minutes until Brown pulls away, gazing mistily into his lover's handsome, even if scarred face. The man hesitates only a couple moments before he rolls him over, laying him down on the blanket that had fallen off of them some time ago, and hurriedly, almost nervously, lowering himself to his groin, guiding his way with smooth kisses.

Matthew's flesh feels like it's warming him from the inside out, and he closes his eyes, feeling his fingers massaging his scalp mindlessly until he cums with a loud sob, biting his lip. Will feels strangely full and soothed, lying on the floor in his arms, breathing his scent, snuggling his cold nose into the curve of his neck.

Only an hour later, they do get up, leaving the house, continuing their journey. Brown, in torn clothes, not feeling the cold and holding Will's hand, keeps him warm as well, and he leads them onward, only glancing occasionally at the stone in the ring to make sure no one else is around, at least not magical ones. They don't see the body of the wolf-man on their way; it is

buried under thick layers of snow after a terrible blizzard. Only occasionally a bird flies by them, as if giving them directions, and they follow in silence, arriving in the evening at a familiar town with a three-story tavern visible on the horizon.

Will takes a bath in their room, and Matthew sits beside him, washing his hair thoughtfully, massaging his shoulders, his chest, occasionally leaning in to kiss the top of his head, and Grahamson can almost feel the contented smile on his lips. The young man's gentle but strong palms slide down his neck to his face, and Will laughs when Brown slides a finger over his lips before gently touching the scars. "How bad does it look?" the prince asks, relaxing in the skillful hands.

Matthew smiles, and then, pulling away briefly, returns one of his hands to his body, the other holding a mirror for the man to look into. Grahamson lazily examines the three streaks left by the claws of Hannibal's familiar, but feels little regret for his injured face. "If you're interested in my opinion, I think you look like a hunter now. My instincts are screaming at me to watch out for you, but my heart knows you won't hurt me" he sees Brown in his reflection, nestling a smile against his ear before leaving a kiss there, and smiles faintly himself.

Will sighs, covering his eyes, and Matthew puts the mirror away, continuing to wash his hair. "I won't hurt you, but Hannibal won't stop. He sent one familiar, he can send another. It's not that hard for him" he says, listening thoughtfully as the water rolls from his hair into the tub. It starts to gradually cool down, but Brown, as if noticing this, touches the water, warming it up rather quickly, and Will wonders if he's wasting a lot of energy on this. They should be careful that weakness doesn't catch up with him suddenly.

"I handled one familiar, I'll handle the next one" Matthew says a little too confidently, and Will takes him by the forearm somewhat anxiously, making him freeze, turning all his attention to him.

"Don't be so overconfident," he cautions. "It never ends well."

When he releases his hand, Brown sighs, shaking his head as he continues to wash his hair. "The legend of Jubilee. No matter how many enemies you defeat, always see the next one as a danger, not a way to show off your heroics" he recalls. "He was a mere human being. I'm not a human being. Not really."

"You're mortal," Will reminds him. "Of flesh and blood."

"Well let's not talk about my flesh, shall we? I know we haven't had dinner yet, but there's no way I'm going to believe you're *that* hungry already."

Grahamson snorts, rolling his eyes at his joke. "I know what you're trying to do. But you're not going to get away with this conversation that easily, not now, not this time" he turns his head to look at Matthew staring back at him. "It's going to be very dangerous around me now. Much more dangerous than before. He'll find us wherever we go."

Brown sighs, keeping his green eyes on his face and touches his palm to his face, smoothing the prickly stubble. "If you want to spend your life running away from him, I'm ready. If you want to kill him now, I'll be there for you too. Just don't forget your promise, min shahmer."

It always hurts Will when he realizes that Matthew can be more than just easygoing and joyful. The shadow of longing and grim expectation of the future never leaves his face, and it darkens his face too. Still, he nods, keeping his gaze on him, thinking of the decision he must make. He rests his head on the side of the tub with a sigh, closing his eyes, and the warm water helps him feel like he's in the sea where he was as a child. He's always dreamed of living on the shore, fishing away from the rest of the people, maybe getting dogs, some other animals, and sometimes going out to sea in a boat he'd build himself. Thoughts of this fill his head, and he smiles warmly, vividly imagining this future, the chance of fulfillment of which is close to one in a million.

He exhales quietly, stopping smiling and opening his eyes, looking up at the ceiling.

"I want to kill Hannibal Lecter" Will says, swallowing, and shifts his gaze to Matthew.

The young man nods at him, smiling weakly. "Then I'll be there with you" he says, leaning in to steal a soft, warm kiss from his lips, and then exhales, *"One way or another."*

Chapter 8

The morning begins with the sound of a lyre wafting across the room, and Will watches from half-closed eyes as Matthew sits in the bathroom, clearly waking much earlier than he did. He hums softly, occasionally stopping and returning to the same line, changing it slightly, and soon Grahamson realizes he's composing. It gives him a slight curiosity and a soft smile, and for a while he just lies there, watching him from his bed.

"What are you singing about?" he asks when Brown interrupts, only silently touching the lyre with his fingertips. The young man immediately looks over his shoulder, only slightly flinching.

He presses his lips together, turning away again and continuing to play the lyre as if contemplating how to respond. "Matemise," Matthew says.

Will smiles weakly, shaking his head, sitting up finally on the bed, rubbing his neck. "You always sing about love, don't you?" he asks quietly, taking his shirt and slipping it over his head, tying the ties across his chest.

Matthew freezes, seemingly wide-eyed, for only a couple moments, clearly slightly confused that Grahamson has understood him. However, he then shakes his head slightly, as if trying to ward off a silly blush; after all, his love for Will has never been a secret. It's ridiculous to be ashamed of the obvious, especially something like this. "Before we met, I sang only legends. Well, in a way, this song is also a legend. About you" he decides to be honest, repeating the beginning of the melody again, hearing quiet footsteps behind him, and then feeling a hand in his hair, causing him to smile like a cat.

"It's more of a serenade in your rendition" Will remarks, taking his portion of breakfast from the tray. The fresh bread crunches in his hands, and it's a simple pleasant joy that makes this morning even better.

"I guess," Matthew smiles.

"Will I ever find out exactly what all those pretty lines mean?" Grahamson sighs, sitting down beside the tub, and Brown raises his head a little to look at him with a slight smile.

"I don't know," he purrs. "Maybe someday I'll write it down and be able to translate it. But sometimes words lose their beauty or meaning when you translate them... maybe you should just learn ophelian."

Will snorts, patting his knee sticking out of the water. "I'd love to, but my teacher's been too lazy to give me lessons lately" he says and Brown laughs quietly, shaking his head, running his fingers over the strings.

"Maybe he wants some sort of reward for his invaluable services" he says.

"Well, in that case I can certainly work things out with him" Grahamson strokes his knee and Matthew smiles contentedly, keeping his warm gaze on him. "I can do a lot of things he might like."

"Oh, I don't doubt it. By the way, did you learn all that or is it something you inherited from your divine great-great-grandfather?" Brown mocks lovingly with a cheeky grin, and Will sprays water on him in retaliation, causing Matthew to only laugh merrily.

"What's ophelian word for stop?"

"Lois."

"Great. Lois" Will says, pointing a finger at him and getting up, walking away to get a drink of water while Matthew continues to lie in the warm water with a smile, putting the lyre aside and just enjoying the warmth and the pleasant smell of the soap. After a while, he steps out of the bath and Will thoughtfully examines from the side the scars on his chest as the young man dresses in his green robes. The sight makes Grahamson remember again the moment of battle, how the raven wings appeared behind Brown's back, engulfed in flames, and how he struck at the sturdy bones of the familiar in bestial fury. His knuckles still bore wounds from that, but treated with the potion, they were almost painless; Will made a mental note to brew more potions when they reached warmer lands. For now, they had to sell their coats so they wouldn't have to carry extra weight on their backs, and buy some food with the rest of the money to make the journey easier. The path to Hannibal's house was not to be too long; when Grahamson had left him, he had not immediately headed northward, at first merely seeking to get as far away from the man as possible, and it was not until some time later that he, calmed down after a long, strenuous journey, had finally made up his mind as to his purpose and direction. And now he was to move, probably for several weeks, straight into the trap from which he had once been sure he had only miraculously escaped. And with a lover on his right shoulder; yes, perhaps he really lacked any common sense or instinct for self-preservation. Not that he had any choice, though, or any possibility of taking a different path, unless he wanted to live his whole life in lingering fear, of course.

He sighs heavily as he closes the room door behind them and heads for the first floor of the tavern, where there are few people at this early hour; Freddie is still there, though, as if she'd never left. She notices the two men right away, and smirks slightly, approaching Will and Matthew curiously as they come over to return the key to the tavern owner. "Interesting few days you've had, eh?" Lounds asks, scrutinizing the scars on the older man's face and then, getting no response, shifting her foxy gaze to Brown. "Encountered any beast in these cursed lands?"

"A wolf. A huge one," Matthew says with a slight, carefree smile, looking down at her in a calm and amused way, his hand gripping the strap of his bag.

"Oh you boys always say that" Freddie scoffs, but Brown only grins back and the girl looks him over curiously, suddenly squinting, looking at his hand. "That's an interesting ring. I saw one like that once on one of the guests who came here" she says, and the young man immediately tenses, taking his hand off the bar, looking at her without his previous smile, and Grahamson turns over his shoulder, looking away from the tavern owner and tensely at

Lounds. "Relax, kid. Just give me a couple of gold coins and I won't tell anyone about your and Mr. Exile's magical secret."

She holds out her open palm, and Will and Matthew look over, synchronized sighing tiredly; Brown wants to say something to her, to argue, but the prince pulls two gold coins out of a pouch on his belt and hands them to Freddie, eliciting a satisfied grin from her.

"It's a pleasure doing business with you, two perfectly ordinary travelers in a land where anyone is willing to kill anyone for sorcery" she stashes the coins in the pocket of her dress and leans back against the bar, turning away with a wave of her hair. "Leave before I feel like blackmailing you some more" Lounds sighs, and Matthew is already opening his mouth to answer her insolence, but Grahamson takes him by the elbow, steadfastly leading him toward the exit:

"Calm down."

"But she threatened you! How dare she do that?" Brown turns to look over his shoulder for a moment, frowning at the girl smiling and winking at them. "I could kill her."

"No. We don't want any trouble, Matthew," Will says, "lois." Only then does Matthew wrinkle his nose but still obediently walks off after him, leaving the redheaded calorian behind.

Life among the warm green forests seems familiar and comforting. For about a week they wander through fields and narrow footpaths, enjoying the birdsong and the melody of the lyre, the sunlight that warms them, the babbling brook and the sweet-smelling flowers. Here Brown hardly uses his strength, nor does he need to replenish it, and he keeps his teeth to himself even in the moments of passion that they share together by the river or in the shade of the tent. They try not to think about the prophecy, and when they talk about the future, they skip over it, ignoring the danger completely, going straight to the illusory happiness they would like to achieve. Will talks about a house by the sea, a boat and dogs; Matthew listens and smiles as he looks at him, and when the man asks about his dreams, Brown just shrugs, saying that he's never thought of anything like that, but he's happy just to be near him and dedicate songs to him. Perhaps, he says, I'd like to learn how to make potions someday. Will teaches him how to do it the next morning, and Matthew smiles like a child glowing with happiness.

Brown prays when he thinks Grahamson isn't looking at him. Silently he asks Heiroz for one more day, and so he does, every day, just to placate the proud god of love, to show him his devotion and the purity of his intentions. Matthew doesn't know if he hears him or what he thinks of his prayers, but after every day he spends with Will, he thanks him, just in case.

When an old grass-covered temple comes across their path, they stop, not believing what their eyes see. It seems like a trick of the eye, too strange of a hallucination; the temple looked to be many hundreds of years old, and there was no settlement or major road nearby, and it was unkept, abandoned by all. It was built of white stone, now covered with moss, and was quite small in size; Matthew assumed it was a camping temple, erected for times of war or migration. That didn't answer the question of why it was so diligently and skillfully made; usually temporary holy structures were made of wood, not such a durable sturdy material.

The men look at each other uncertainly, and then Grahamson still stashes his sword in its scabbard and moves towards the building, treading carefully on the hard ground, passing a meadow full of flowers.

He comes to a door on which words have been written in ancient runes, the language of the gods. Will exhales, lowering his gaze as Matthew still steps closer to him, asking what it says. "This is a temple for sacrifices. It's been here since before Arson was born."

Brown shifts a quick glance to the runes and back to Will. "It's the temple of Heiroz," he realizes, and Grahamson nods. The young man covers his mouth with the palm of his hand for a few moments, looking at the patterns carved in the stone, and then he reaches out his hand, touching them tentatively, as if afraid of their possible divine power. The god of love had stopped accepting sacrifices after bonding with his eternal lover, succumbing to his gentle persuasive words. Arson was a good manipulator. Heiroz knew this, and forgave him every time, only admiring his courage and sensuality. Blood hadn't been shed in the name of the god of love in a long time, at least not in this way. The only thing he was content with was drops of blood from lovers binding each other by the bonds of marriage, which they mixed during the wedding ceremony in a single vessel. It was hardly enough for the usually greedy gods, but Heiroz was getting enough power from his own love and Arson's boundless love for him. He was giving him even more than anyone would have thought possible. That must be why some of the gods were jealous of them. No one but they were loved among the gods and loved like this, more than a simple deity, more than by a simple worship. One could only wonder how family dinners together went in the divine lands.

Matthew looks at Will, staring thoughtfully at the temple door, and suddenly Brown has a crazy idea, which he smiles at; Grahamson notices it, realizing from his familiar expression that he has thought of something special, and looks at him expectantly. The young man, however, turns his head, and then, leaving his bag of belongings by the temple, takes Grahamson's hand resolutely, leading him away toward the clearing. "Let's go!" he encourages, and Will bewilderedly obeys until they stop among a clump of flowers.

"What are you doing?" he asks, looking at Matthew sitting down among the grass, plucking one flower after another.

"We're going to get the god of love on our side" Brown says, and then lifts his head, squinting slightly against the bright sun and smiling. "We will get married" he says as he continues to kneel on the ground, holding out a lavender flower to his lover.

Will freezes in place, looking at it for a couple of moments before still hesitantly accepting the flower, taking it in his hands, causing Matthew to give a cheerful happy smile before he goes back to picking flowers for Grahamson's wedding wreath. "I don't know how to weave wreaths" the man warns as he looks around, searching for the right flower. There were a variety of them here, there were flowers growing near each other that ordinarily could not do so, and it was not hard to guess that it had something to do with the temple towering so close by. He took an azalea from a small bush nearby, remembering Beverly reading to him from her book on the language of flowers. Take care of yourself for me. A flower usually given to warriors by their partners before they were sent off to battle. What is their life now if not the anticipation of battle?

He knows what lavender means, too. Devotion.

"I'll help you, don't worry" Matthew says as Will comes back to him, dropping down next to him on the ground. He looks up at him and smiles, taking the azalea he holds out to him, and then leans forward, kissing him softly briefly on the lips, and continues picking the flowers; Grahamson does the same, but more timidly and tentatively. The thought never leaves him that they are trying to deceive a god, and he does not know which one - the goddess of darkness and death, who wants to separate them in a terrible way for her own ends, or the god of love? Is it deception, though? Their souls are already bound, their bodies have already been intertwined under the glow of the moon. All that was left for them to do was to bind themselves with blood and oaths. It seemed like a reasonable move, even if one of them would soon die at the dictates of cruel fate.

Will doesn't think it will help gain more of Heiroz's favor for their journey, but doesn't speak of it, allowing Brown to think positively. To upset him with the truth makes no sense and would even be cruel. He allows himself to be deceived as well, smiling weakly as they meet glances while Matthew weaves his wreath.

He teaches this art to the prince, and the latter tries, genuinely pleased when he succeeds. It's so soothing, like when he was making fishing lures. Methodical and close to nature. Brown's quiet voice beside him only helped him relax more, and the smile on his face is genuine, honest, calm as they do get up off the ground, heading for the temple while the sun is still below the horizon.

On the inside, it's no bigger than their room in the tavern, and the light falls only from a hole in the ceiling, but they change that by lighting with Brown's magic the candles that are plentiful here. There is an empty bowl on the altar, and next to it are the ritual stones that before the god's flower sickness symbolized love. They don't touch them, carefully taking the flowers they handed to each other and dropping them into the bowl that would soon hold their blood, their vows. Will thinks back to all the ceremonies he had ever been to when his older brothers were getting married. It had always been strange, and he remembered them preparing their vows nervously beforehand, though only their chosen ones and Heiroz himself could hear them, and until now Will had never understood the complexity of the process. Now he was beginning to feel nervous himself, and he cast a glance at Matthew, illuminated by the warm light of the candles, to make sure, and yes - the young man was worried too, it was obvious in his eyes and his tightened lips, his careful, concentrated actions, his fingers reverently holding the wreath for Will. They collide glances, and only when he catches it does Brown smile, like a child up to some silly prank with a friend.

"Usually when a bard gets married, it's always quiet. They say we can't stand other people's music" he whispers, smiling cheerfully. "It distracts us from our feelings and makes us think something like 'I could sing better' or 'I'll never be able to sing that beautifully.' So it's good that there's no one else here."

"I like the privacy," Will agrees softly, looking at the candles. They are silent for a couple moments, listening, with only the birdsong outside the windows coming to their ears. It brings a smile to both of their faces. As long as the birds are singing, all is good, he thinks.

Exhaling, he turns to face Matthew, holding his wreath in his hands, and Brown, realizing it's time, stands properly as well. He raises his hands and Will tilts his head, covering his eyes, catching his breath as a wreath of lavender and the greenery growing around it descends on his brown hair, beautifully complementing the arrangement Matthew had made for him. He straightens up, looking into his bright green eyes until after a couple moments, Brown, still smiling, tilts his head in front of him and he lowers the yellow wreath of azaleas down on him, looking like the sun in his dark hair. His fingers twitch as he lowers his hands, and he clings to eye contact, as if hoping Matthew will prompt him, help him figure out what to do next; he feels thrown into the water. Brown smiles at him, taking away all his worries as he touches his cheek, tucking a brown curl behind his ear before he himself takes a hunting knife from the man's belt, and Will, inhaling quietly, watches him hand it to him and holds out his hand, ready for the cut.

Grahamson takes it gingerly and after hesitating for a couple of moments, still cuts his pale skin, bringing the young man's palm to the bowl and scarlet drops drip onto the flowers, staining them, scorching them. For a few long moments they stare at it as if mesmerized, and then Matthew leans toward him, close, intimate, right in his ear whispering his vows to him, as if there was anyone around to listen. "I, Matthew Brown, exiled from Ophelia, wanderer, give you my blood and soul, vowing that I will follow you in life and in death wherever the gods send you, vowing to protect you no matter what danger awaits us, at any cost and always, vowing to pray for you even when death takes me, vowing, that I will shed any blood for you and break any barriers in my path to you, vowing every song I sing to honor you and my love for you, vowing to give you the peace your soul longs for, until my last breath and beyond, and no one can make me break the oath I take here."

His lips touch Will's ear, frozen in place, breathless, as if the world around him had stopped while the tender words poured from the young man's eager mouth, and everything only dies down when he pulls away, carefully, quietly taking the knife from his hands. Grahamson realizes what the emphasis on the word "no one" at the end of his oath means. No one, not even the gods. Even the god of love, rests his boldness silent between the lines. Will can only hope that if Heiroz won't forgive them for this audacity, Arson will.

He holds out his hand to him, opening palm up, realizing that he will now have a scar on both arms, and it brings a faint smile to his face. Warm fingers gently hold it as the knife blade gently slices through the rough skin, and scarlet blood flows into the bowl the next moment, mixing with Brown's blood, staining the purple and yellow petals almost maroon, and Will, swallowing, leans down to Matthew's ear with a hitch. "I, William, son of Graham, banished from Calorian, wanderer, give you my blood and soul," the words sink into his throat, he feels strange, as if there are a thousand arrows pointed at him, ready to pierce him through. His voice is quiet and he closes his eyes, gaining on the confidence living inside his heart, hot as the stars. "I swear," he says, his voice steady and calm, "to go against any prophecy if it directs me against you. *Matemise."*

He is brief, saying what he is sure of, what his heart tells him, and as he pulls away, he sees the smile of his lover, who immediately reaches up to kiss him, wrapping his palms around his face, staining it with his blood, and staining himself with it as Grahamson places his hand on his neck, drawing him closer.

They do not leave this temple, sheltering from the night's cold and any danger, completely absorbed in each other, as if maddened by passion and desire for one another, touching their naked bodies like shrines, stroking and kissing each other, entwined together as if in this moment only the two of them and no one else existed. Wreaths fall from their hair with the movement, and Matthew pulls away from Will's flushed lips, looking up at him, at the purple flowers folded like a halo over his head. It touches something inside his heart, and he kisses him again, worshiping every millimeter of his skin, feeling the boiling feelings he's trying to find an outlet for. He keeps Grahamson from freezing on the stone floor, first warming him with his heat and then grabbing a blanket from one of their bags, laying him down on the thick fabric. A whisper at his ear makes the young man flinch and let out a low moan, then nod confidently, and he pulls one of the vials of potions from the bag, pouring the lube onto his fingers, placing them against Will's tight ring, carefully beginning to stretch it, keeping his gaze on his handsome face, afraid of hurting him or doing something wrong. He is mesmerized by the curves of his lips and the quiet sounds his patient touch evokes, almost like playing a lyre, and feels himself as a musician impossibly in love with this music, falling to Grahamson's lips for a kiss, entwining their tongues, feeling his arm around his shoulders in a tight embrace. The sound of their heavy breathing, soft moans and loving whispers fills the walls of the temple of love, and Matthew presses his nose into his neck, the tip of his tongue tracing the bite scar but not tearing the skin, holding himself back for the good of his lover, moving inside his warm body, listening to his sobs and feeling his fingernails digging into his shoulder blades where the raven's fiery wings had burst from about a week ago. Matthew moans, finishing, and at the same instant Will pours out too, as if he'd only been waiting for this, and they find each other's lips, exchanging lazy warmth, naked and close as only lovers can be.

They lie side by side in the darkness of the night, having eaten dinner without getting out from under the blanket, and the candles continue to illuminate the temple room, giving them a chance to admire each other. Noticing Will's slight shivering, Brown helps him dress a little and does the same, and then he embraces him again, and they lie side by side, talking quietly, as if afraid to break the silence that is soothing and engulfing them in its beauty.

Matthew remembers something at some point and removes his ring, taking Grahamson's hand and placing it on the matching finger, smiling, and Will chuckles, arching an eyebrow. "Your wedding ring is something you stole from a man?"

"You don't like it?" Brown asks playfully offended, then smiles as the man intertwines their fingers with a slight chuckle. "Well, at least you'll be safer with it. And always know I'm there for you. Always," he whispers, leaning down to his lips, drawing him into another kiss before they fall asleep next to each other, lulled to sleep by the silence of the temple.

No sooner do the sun's rays enter through the windows of the temple than Matthew wakes up, feeling the sensation like a breeze ruffling his hair. He blinks sleepily at the peacefully sleeping Will lying next to him, smiling warmly at the feeling of tenderness in his chest that the mere sight of his lover causes, but the smile suddenly melts away when he slides his gaze to the ring and notices the scarlet color that has filled part of the magic stone.

Brown freezes as if pierced by the cold, and looks around warily - the candles are out, some burned out and some seemingly extinguished by the wind, which was impossible without divine intervention - a divine fire never just goes out. He sits up, trying not to wake Will, and decides to get up, taking a hunting knife from the pile of weapons left near their makeshift sleeping place just in case. A knot of anxiety clenches in his chest as he walks out of the temple, looking around the dawn-lit outdoor area, seeing nothing at first, and yet he sets his hand on fire just in case, ready to protect his lover from any possible danger.

He hears a rustle to his right and turns, flinching, eyes rounding as he sees a man - a familiar - with dragon wings behind him, walking confidently and determinedly straight towards him. Without thinking, Matthew throws fire at him to stop the man, Brown's body tense and ready to spread his own wings, eyes burning emerald, he's ready to strike again, but suddenly he sees that his fire does nothing to his opponent, and the man only smirks as if the heat tickled his neck rather than melting him or leaving serious burns. This makes Matthew frown, confused, and the creature takes advantage of this, coming sharply closer and grabbing him by the throat, throwing him immediately against the temple wall, and Brown falls to the ground, feeling the pain in the back of his head, but he doesn't let himself freeze in place, immediately trying to get up as he is suddenly pressed right against the white stone, clutching his throat. "Fire can't hurt a dragon, you silly bird" comes a hoarse growling voice, almost inhuman, and Matthew stares into the man's dark eyes, trying in vain to pull his hands away from him with one hand and with the other grabbing the knife and stabbing him right in the stomach with it, forcing him to let go and take a step back.

"But the sword can" Brown says hoarsely after the stranglehold, taking the knife more comfortably in his hand, about to strike again, and now they have a fight, one slash across the tough skin followed by a punch or a tug of the hair, and the wings behind Matthew's back spread out, helping him gain more strength, and he grapples with him as if in an embrace, stabbing him right at the base of the dragon's wing, making him hiss in pain. "I won't let you take Will away from me" hisses Brown in his ear, seized with anger, but suddenly he hears a chuckle from the dragon.

"Idiot" he says, "we didn't come for him."

"We?"

Everything happens too fast, and the dragon flings him away from him, hurling him to the ground, and wings of fire burn the flowers, and the next instant something seems to wrap around his neck, and he grabs for the lasso with his hands, but it strikes him as if by lightning, and the last thing Matthew manages to see before he passes out, extinguished all at once like a match, is the figure of a familiar woman with blond hair and cold features. Bedelia's eyes are red and her hand clutches the lasso, untouched by its lightning, as if she's tamed it like a dangerous dog. Everything fades away.

"Why don't you let him hear?" the young man asks, standing at the window of the small temple. His golden curls are untouched by the wind, like the marble of a statue. He watches the battle, clutching his flute in his fingers, fighting the urge to play it, disobeying his lover's words.

"He will want to help him and perish" the god says, taking the bloody flowers from the bowl, devouring them, his offering.

"Couldn't he handle them?" Arson asks, turning around, looking at the man lying in peaceful sleep, covered in a blanket. "The two of them are strong."

"They would defeat them" Heiroz agrees, putting the empty cup back down and looking at William as well, only to slide his gaze to his companion in the next moment. "But they wouldn't defeat Fluria. And she won't stop until she sends them straight to her servant" he approaches Arson, placing a hand on his shoulder. "This is the most painless path."

"The path to the fulfillment of the prophecy" the young man reminds him, lifting his gaze from the sleeping man. "Do you really believe they can avoid it?"

"The only way to destroy the prophecy is to get close enough to it" he replies.

"They even got it wrong."

The god smiles calmly, stroking his companion's shoulder. "Can you blame them, flower of my soul? It's a prophecy - they are worded to lead to a certain goal for anyone who hears them" he says, but, failing to get a smile from the young man, sighs.

"They will be angry with you. When that love ruins them" the bard says, and it sounds almost accusatory.

"I can take it" the man replies. "I will not hold a grudge against them."

"I will be angry with you too" it is already a challenge, and in the lover's eyes the god sees the determination inherent in him, the determination for which he once loved him.

"You will comfort him when life leaves him" Heiroz concedes.

"And that's all?" Arson asks, his face tense and the god wants to touch his forehead to relieve that anxiety, which he does, softening his features.

"That's all we can do."

Chapter 9

Matthew comes to his senses in a place that is unusually cold, and for a couple of moments his mind, which has not fully grasped reality yet, flashes with the idea that he is back in the northern lands. Only a moment later, when he manages to open his eyes, does he see the outline of the dark cellar around him: a ladder with a trapdoor in the ceiling across from him, next to it the hooks that butchers usually use to drain the blood from pigs. Distinctive puddles have dried on the floor. Brown tries to turn his head as sensitivity returns to his body in waves, and realizes that his arms are cuffed and he hangs by a chain from one of these hooks - the muscles are painfully tense and tired. He swallows, and feels the pain in his neck, remembering how he found himself here, remembering the rope around his neck. Matthew looks down, seeing blood on his clothes, his toes barely touching the floor. His head hurts and he lets out a muffled groan, squinting, swaying slightly, however, immediately realizing that he can't get himself off the hook that easily.

"Oh, you're already awake" comes a calm, friendly voice, and Brown belatedly realizes that some man is coming down the ladder, holding a small lamp. "Very well" he steps his feet to the floor and waves his hand, and immediately several more lamps light up in the room, hurting Matthew with their brightness, making him squint harder and wrinkle his nose. However, he forces himself to open his eyes to look his captor in the face, as if to show him - do whatever you want, I'm not afraid of you. That made the man in the surprisingly nice dark clothes (probably taken off some poor travelers, Matthew realized) smirk, and he stopped a few feet away from him, not holding anything sharp or potentially dangerous. He was potentially dangerous on his own, though, as far as Brown could tell. "You killed one of my familiars and seriously injured another. I'm impressed."

Matthew swallowed to make it easier to speak. "Always happy to impress," his voice sounds painfully hoarse, and it makes him wrinkle his nose in frustration. "And I was told you were more hospitable."

"Forgive my caution, but I'm afraid it's a prerequisite to your staying here alive," Hannibal says calmly, and Brown grins, looking at him with light green eyes.

"Are you afraid of me?" he asks mockingly, not stopping his smirk.

Lecter outwardly doesn't react in any particular way, only smiling slightly. "No. Right now, you're nothing more than an ordinary human with a spot on your body. Without your power, you're not a threatening danger, not even to a mouse."

"Then why bother with the chains?" Matthew asks.

Hannibal shrugs. "Restraints like that usually help people understand their place during a given interaction. Makes them speak more politely."

"Well, obviously not in my case," Brown remarks.

"Obviously" Lecter agrees, but doesn't remove the chains. "I suppose it's too late to teach manners to a wandering musician. Don't worry, you won't be hanging here too long - we just have to wait for Will."

"Ah, of course. And then we all have a nice little dinner waiting for us" Matthew says, pressing his lips together for a couple of moments, trying to hold the tension in his body and the pain. "You rushed it, you know. Will doesn't love me yet."

That brings a chuckle from Hannibal. He doesn't immediately explain it, for a while just shaking his head, looking away, examining his neck. "Will loves everyone who loves him. It's his gift and his curse - empathy of that sort makes him fall in love very quickly. Usually it takes time for people to get to know each other and see if their souls answer the call of that new person's one, but with Will it happens quickly. A conversation can be enough for him to understand everything about a person and choose him or not to choose him. What happens next is just a gradual slide deeper and deeper into the abyss that can be interrupted or not," he says. "I could have interrupted it earlier, but I had to hold back for a good cause. All in all, it was not in vain. Your feelings bloomed like flowers, didn't they? You've bound each other with so many threads that I must confess I'm a little offended by Will's choice."

"Well, maybe you shouldn't have fed him the person he loved?" observes Matthew with a chuckle. "And you're going to step on the same rake again. Look who doesn't learn from his mistakes."

Hannibal looks at him thoughtfully, but after a few moments he smiles again. "Don't worry about that. I've had time to come to terms with the fact that I'm going to lose Will. Have you?"

Will wakes up alone and feels a chill that he's had time to unlearn over the past few days spent next to the always warming Matthew. He sleepily opens his eyes, looking around a little tiredly, hearing the loud disturbing birdsong outside the windows, and rubs his face, trying to chase away the remnants of sleep. He feels the ring with his skin, and smiles slightly, remembering last night, deciding to look at his gift, as he suddenly flinches, seeing that only a single blue color shines inside the stone. Not a drop of green is anywhere near it, and this causes him to wake up instantly, sitting up and beginning to look around, noticing Matthew's things lying next to his own, including the lyre. Grahamson rises to his feet and without delay, only taking his sword, goes outside.

He freezes as he stands on the steps to the temple, looking at the wing-shaped scorched flower field, and then walks over to it in a panic, looking at the leaves that have already cooled. A pair of birds sit anxiously in the grass, chirping, and Will suppresses the urge to ask them where he is. No matter how closely he and Matthew bonded, he still didn't have his magic.

Taking a better look at his surroundings, he notices some blood on the white stone wall, and then a hunting knife lying close to the entrance. He finds no bodies around, and realizes - they've taken him. Hannibal uses Matthew as bait, as if they weren't headed straight for his house anyway. Just decided to separate them early, must have been for his own convenience. Will feels annoyed, but only for a couple moments; anxiety comes up to his throat again, and

he touches his neck, wondering how he'd feel if Brown was already dead. He doesn't want to know the answer.

Be that as it may, with determination he returns to the temple, taking some of his belongings to be able to carry them on his back, leaving the rest in this forsaken place. He takes the lyre with him and heads on his way, peering at the ring in tense silence, watching its color with breathless anticipation of the familiar green hue or a new one, probably black as death itself. He sensed that there wasn't long to go, and he recognized the trails he'd walked with Abigail while hunting, remembered which way was the river, where they'd fished, and where the first deer she'd shot with her arrow had been. Memories send goosebumps running through his body, but he forces himself to walk on, deeper into the forest, moving away from the temple and not even mentally speaking to the gods. He has nothing to say to them.

He freezes, coming out from behind the bushes to a small clearing, in the middle of which stands a familiar house. He doesn't reach for his weapon - it's useless with Hannibal. Besides, no matter how this ends, Will wanted to talk to Lecter first; he knows he won't change his mind, no matter what he says to him, no matter what reasoning he tries to use, he'll only get the same seemingly logical - perhaps divinely logical - arguments in return, but he wants to hear him anyway. Sighing quietly, Grahamson lowers his gaze to the ring, which glows blue, green, red and black. He glances at the front door, and knowing it is unlocked, he walks to it with a steady stride, taking the handle and pulling it quietly toward him, and it yields without any difficulty. Of course, after all, he was expected. And for quite some time.

He closes the door behind him, glancing around warily, and, seeing no one, takes a slow step toward the dining room - the table is set for two, but the plates and glasses are empty. Will stops at the clock, looks down and sees the scarlet drops on the carpet, remembering the last time he and Hannibal met in this room. He could have gotten rid of the stains, but he didn't. Grahamson had expected it.

"Will," comes a voice from behind him, and the man turns around, freezing, looking at Lecter a few feet away from him. As he does so, he realizes he's never seen him so clearly before; his empathy, which seemed to refuse to work around this sorcerer, has started functioning again, as if he's brushed a thick layer of dust and dirt off a mirror. In front of him stands a man who has come too far to turn back; a man who believes in what he is doing because he has no other choice, for then it would appear that he has done a terrible thing for nothing. He has nothing to lose. He would rather die than take a step backward.

"Hannibal" he responds calmly, not taking a step closer or farther away. He doesn't reach for the knife.

Lecter stares back at him with a peculiar feeling inside, and Will sees the difference in the way he and Matthew look at him. Love comes in so many forms, so many kinds, from the twisted desire to mutually possess each other to desperate devotion. He knows, feels, that Hannibal would like to take back what they had between them, but he can't afford it. Too much has been done to stop at the very finale, and each one of them realizes it.

"Are you going to ask me if he's alive?" asks-prompts Hannibal.

"I know he's alive," Will replies calmly. Lecter stares at him almost puzzled for a moment, but then his gaze clings to the ring on his finger.

"Ah," he realizes, "our dear friend Dimmond. He has asked me to return the ring to him when I have finished with this matter."

"And will you do that?" idly wonders Grahamson.

"I don't think he'll have any use for it now," Hannibal remarks calmly. Will nods: he didn't expect anything else.

"I knew you'd eat him" the man exhales, finally recoiling and looking away, almost relaxedly looking further around the dining room, in which nothing has changed since his last evening here. Even the towels are the same. Though Hannibal must have washed them several times, as well as the tablecloth. He had arranged everything before the guests arrived; symbolism and sentimentality were his eternal companions and weaknesses. "He's cheeky. You only put up with it from me" Will continues, then shrugs. "He turned out not to be a good enough substitute, didn't he? A tasteless parody."

Hannibal doesn't deny it, it's true. Instead, he watches Will, as if he still can't quite believe the prince has returned to the walls of his home after so many months. "Do you have a problem with taste?"

"Is he in the basement?" Grahamson ends abruptly the small talk without turning to look back at him.

"I'm afraid what's left of Dimmond has already been given to the beasts to eat."

"You know I'm not asking about Dimmond, Hannibal," Will remarks a little irritated, still looking at the man. "Matthew's in the basement?"

There's silence for a moment. Then a nod.

Will nods, looking away again. "Did you keep Abigail there at first too, or did you mercifully dispose of her all at once?" he asks caustically, but doesn't wait for an answer. "Did you explain to her before she died what you were doing it for? You loved her too, didn't you? She became family. Like the little sister you ate to survive, fully aware of your actions" he feels Hannibal tense slightly at the topic, immediately trying to hide it under a mask of curiosity. "Don't" Will cuts him off immediately, glaring at him. "Enough with the lies, Hannibal. You want to lie or make excuses, you better keep quiet. I know the truth. I know it now. Remember when we were discussing family values once? I talked a lot about my relatives, my parents, my brothers, my sister. You didn't mention that all the chaos and grief in your family life started because of the prophecy. Listen, have you ever wondered how the townspeople found out about your nice family of sorcerers and witches in the first place?" he asks with a dash of impertinence, stepping closer, not avoiding even a second of eye contact. "Ever wonder why it was shortly after my lovely distant relative came to visit you for a cup of tea? She manipulated you, Hannibal. She set up the whole thing to keep you on the hook. She killed your parents, Hannibal, and you want to give her the laurels of ruling the world

now" he chuckles and tilts his head to the side. "Are you sure that's what your sister would want?"

"I know what Mischa would want. To go back to her family."

"I'm not talking about Mischa," a chuckle. Oh, how he loves watching the spark of puzzlement in his dark eyes! He could revel in it forever, and a smile looms on his face. "Yeah. You know, I have to admit, the romance between the father of the family and the maid is such a hackneyed classic that it's kind of embarrassing to even talk about it. Such a cliché."

Hannibal ponders the information he's received. "So Chiyoh carries the mark as well?"

"Yes, you have the same blood running through you," Will smiles, then tilts his head curiously, frowning slightly. "You'd eat her instead of Mischa if you knew, wouldn't you? And then she would have survived, you wouldn't have had to kill her. You could still be together. You could have taught her magic. She could have met Abigail. But that would probably change something too important to Fluria's plan. And the goddess of darkness didn't want that" he says. "A selfish goal is more important than the suffering of some pathetic mortals."

"Selfishness can also be a motivator for good deeds" Hannibal remarks after a few moments of thoughtful silence. "There will be no more death, the dead joining the living. Don't you want to meet Beverly, Abigail?"

"Hannibal, I don't believe you don't understand that, and so I daresay you are consciously trying to manipulate me. I don't like it" Will replies caustically, looking into his eyes, standing less than a step away. "It's not just good people who die. And not just people. Have you forgotten who is trapped in the kingdom of darkness? As soon as the door of Hayloth's cage opens, the first thing he'll do is go to war against the rest of the gods. People won't die anymore, but that doesn't mean they won't suffer, get injured in this fight. It's going to be a disaster. And if he kills someone from the pantheon?"

"There have been wars even in the absence of the god of war. There will also be love in the absence of the god of Love, and so on down the list," Lecter calmly parried. "Chaos can't last forever, Will. Things will order themselves over time. It’s a law. And by then, we'll all be past our becoming."

"I don't want to become anything. I don't want war. I don't want chaos, Hannibal," Will says in a loud whisper, not seeing a shadow of humility in the man's dark eyes. "The only thing I can do for you is kill you and beg the gods to let you go to your sister and parents."

They look at each other and both realize the point they have driven each other to. "Do you really think that my death will prevent the prophecy from coming true? Don't you think I've already fulfilled my role?"

"You may be surprised, Hannibal, but not eating people is pretty easy," Will sneers.

"If you say so" Lecter concedes, not taking his eyes off his face. Grahamson knows, feels, that he wanted a different opinion from him, but is still sure he's right. Proud as the gods,

Will thinks, and strong almost like them. And yet he doesn't attack first, doesn't do anything, as if humbly waiting for Grahamson to plunge the knife now clutched in his palm into him. "Know that I will not deny myself the pleasure of testing you in a fair fight, Will."

"You bet," he replies calmly, looking into dark eyes, and the world seems to slow down as he grips the knife tighter and jerks forward, stabbing him in the same place Hannibal had scarred him during their last argument in the kitchen. He could swear that for a moment the sorcerer's eyes grew even darker, as if shrouded in a gloomy haze, and his mind told him to back away, to draw his sword and just blow his head off, but he hesitated, he hesitated because the blood, dripping from the wound intensifies as he jerks his arm sharply to the left, leaving Lecter with a bloody smile, and the man takes advantage of it, grabbing him by the hair and turning him around, making him slam his forehead against the wall, wincing in pain.

Grahamson, eyes ajar, notices in the fog nearby the drops of blood that splattered from Hannibal's shoulder a couple months ago. Perhaps Lecter isn't the only one with the sin of sentimentality.

When he forces himself back to his senses a few moments later, pulling his sword out of its sheath, the sorcerer is already stabbing him, hitting him in the shoulder with a kitchen knife, Will groans in pain, but he pushes Hannibal down on the table and uses his sword to hit him in the arm. He mentally notes that Hannibal remains true to his word, fighting fair, without magic. It feels equal. Gives Will a real chance. Will sees the curiosity in the dark eyes. He can try to satisfy it for the last time.

Hannibal manages to dislodge the sword and throw it to the floor, but Grahamson still has some weapon, and as he is pressed against the wall again, he manages to pick up a sharply sharpened arrow and thrust it straight into the man's neck. Lecter freezes, moving half a step away from his thrust, taking his hand to where the tip enters under his skin. Will, breathing hard, stares at him. He can't pull the arrow out unless he wants to bleed out right here. He can stop and use his magic, but to do that he needs to get to his supplies - and Will notices his gaze darting in that very direction. Grahamson thinks about not letting him do that, but then he hears a scream under his feet, and he recognizes it, immediately lowering his gaze to the hatch leading to the basement. He and Hannibal look into each other's eyes again, and Grahamson realizes he should have asked more about how Matthew is now before starting all this. He didn't even ask if Brown was downstairs alone, or with any of the familiars.

The decision has to be made quickly, and he tears towards the basement descent, only just grabbing his sword from the floor, and Lecter must be grinning as he heads towards his supplies - he must not want to miss the chance of a second round. Fine. Brown's scream - a suppressed one - is repeated, and Will wastes no time on the stairs, jumping to the floor of the dimly candlelit room, seeing one of Hannibal's familiars turning to face him, holding a red-hot poker. His eyes are human, and Grahamson guesses that he's weak right now; must be from the battle with Matthew earlier. It's a good thing, and Will wastes no time taking two steps towards him and stabbing him with his sword right through his chest, getting a burn in return from the poker touching his shoulder. He groans in pain, and as the familiar's weapon falls, he throws it aside with his boot, draws his sword, and cuts his head off in a strong, sure motion. Blood splatters across his face, black as ash - Will presses his lips together and closes

his eyes, swallowing, trying not to think about the sensation, before opening his eyes and looking at Brown.

The young man is exhausted, there are several burn marks on his arms, suspended by a chain from a hook, as well as on his chest, his shirt torn, bloodstained. Another burn is right on top of the black bird-shaped mark, and it hurts to look at, Will feels his pain as his own, but doesn't look away, only coming closer, calling his name. "Matthew" he touches his chin, lifting it, but Brown seems weak from the pain, it costs him great labor to even open his eyes slightly to look at his lover. Grahamson runs a quick glance over his body, and then puts the sword in its scabbard and wraps his arms around him to lift him up and off the hook; the young man is unable to stand on his feet, and Will has to help him sit on the table, swinging the knives and torture instruments off of it. He wraps his palms around his face, forcing the boy to look at him, and anxiety creeps inside him as he finally figures out how to help him, how to save him, giving him enough strength to survive and defeat Hannibal. It just had to be done right.

Will tilts his head to the side, exposing his neck to him, the mark is seen on it, and Matthew's languid gaze clings to his exposed skin, and without even realizing his actions, he reaches for him, obeying his inner desires and urges, and bares his sharp teeth. Grahamson tries not to let out a shriek, only grasping at Brown to steady himself as the young man drinks drop by drop from the open wound, trying to saturate the magical darkness within him.

Matthew feels stronger with each passing moment, and at one point breaks the iron shackles on his wrists to wrap his arms around Will, pulling his body closer to him, continuing to revel in his taste like divine ambrosia, again and again, in the euphoria of the taste in his mouth and the feeling in his heart and shoulder blades - he's about to unleash his wings full of fire. One of his hands burrows into his curls, and it's as if he hears Will's faint voice through a veil, and only that makes him pull away, with his mouth covered in blood and his green eyes burning. Matthew smiles, blissful, wrapping his palms around Grahamson's face for a kiss, but notices the pallor of his skin and the weight of his body - he can't keep himself on his feet, almost falling, only for Brown to catch him before his head hits the cold floor.

Fear creeps into the young man's features and he looks at Will in panic, calling his name as he lays him on the ground, touching his face with trembling palms, lightly slapping his cheeks, but there is no response and Matthew's heart almost stops and the silence of the basement stuns him and hot tears form in his eyes as he shakes him again and again and gets no response. Will grows colder with each passing moment.

Brown freezes. He barely hears footsteps on the ladder as he stares into his lover's face, realizing what he has just done to him, and he is angry at himself, at Hannibal, at everyone, and a trembling palm covers his chest, listening to his weak heart until it stops beating after a few moments. He hears a creak behind his shoulder, and he looks back, glaring at his captor, anger burning him from the inside out, and he doesn't care if there's an ounce of regret in his eyes or anything else. He doesn't care. He wants to kill him.

He kills him. It happens quickly, loudly, decisively. His fire-covered hands clutch his face, leaving burns, melting the skin beneath their touch, shouting, *it's all your fault, it's your fault.* He twists Hannibal's neck, throwing him to the floor, and continues to burn his body with his

blows until he notices Will's sword in its scabbard lying on the ground next to him. He grabs it and it glows in the palm of his hand as he raises it straight into the man's neck, underneath his mark, silencing him forever.

Matthew stops, looking down at him, breathing heavily. He turns his head towards Grahamson and the fire in his arms disappears, he crawls closer to him and wraps his arms around his body, feeling both very strong and insanely weak at the same time. Tears roll down his face as he warms his hands and lips as if trying to bring back the lost warmth to his body, trailing desperately bitter kisses up his neck with the bite mark, sobbing, feeling self-loathing and insane fear for having done this to his lover. His heart breaks as he rises slightly and looks into Will's emotionless face, stroking his cheekbones, his curls with his palms as if comforting, warming him. He shakes with emotion, tears dripping down on his body, but no miracle happens. Matthew moans helplessly, throwing his head back as if he were going to beg the gods to take him instead of the prince, but the sound drowns in his throat. He sobs again and again, leaning his face against the neck he so loved to sleep against on the cool nights of their journey, and kisses it, again and again, as if apologizing. *Shaele*, he whispers. *Please*, he repeats, already in calorian. He sobs again, baring his fangs, and it's only when he touches the tips of his cold skin that he suddenly realizes what he's doing, and it shocks his mind, making him sit up, crawling a couple of feet away from his body, staring at Will wide-eyed.

He wanted so damn badly to devour him, every part of him. Just to keep him inside him, not buried in the ground or engulfed in fire and ashes scattered at sea. Those thoughts keep buzzing in his head, but he drives them away again and again like pesky flies, staring at the body of his lover as he finally realizes everything, realizes that he has just almost fulfilled the prophecy, that he was the one the prophecy spoke of, that he is the exile with the special blood, the one destined to start a new world. He loves Will so much, with all his heart, soul, body, that such love would saturate his magic, equaling him in power with the gods themselves. All it took was just giving in to the beastly feeling inside, consuming Grahamson whole, every drop of his blood and every bit of his flesh. Matthew covers his mouth with the palm of his hand, biting his fingers, trying to bring himself to his senses.

He can't do this.

Will didn't want this.

How can he allow himself to disobey Will's will, even if it costs him an incredible effort of will?

Matthew throws his head back, hitting the top of his head against the wall with a thud, not even writhing, and just stares at his lover's body, gradually calming his breathing. Tears dry up on his face, his hands gradually stop shaking as he forces himself to gather his thoughts. He can't just look at his body. Can't continue to be in this corpse-strewn basement of the sorcerer's house. He forces himself to his feet and walk over to Will, taking him in his arms to lift him up and carry him out of the cursed house and into the field of flowers.

He lowers Grahamson onto the green grass that rustles in the breeze. Matthew listens, but he doesn't hear the birds singing - they are silent as if in anticipation. Brown rubs his face with

the palms of his hands, trying to stop the tears and the hysteria coming to his throat, and looks up at the sky.

He closes his eyes, whispering the words of his prayer a little louder than the wind. He begs Heiroz, but he remains silent as always, and then Matthew lowers his head with a grimace, finding Will's hunting knife in his hand, bringing it to his chest. There are no burns left on it, all healed by the miraculous blood, only the scars inflicted by the previous familiar continue to adorn his warm body. He squints, pressing down, and a streak of blood begins to run down his stomach when he suddenly freezes.

Miraculous blood.

It sounds crazy in Matthew's head, but he decides to try his luck by testing his new theory. He looks at Will, gathering the last shreds of determination in his chest, and cuts his palm in a sharp motion, and hot blood starts to flow quickly from the wound, and he brings it to Grahamson's lips, forcing him to open his mouth. Some drops still flow past, and Matthew almost has time to be disappointed in his idea when he suddenly sees his eyes move under his eyelids and his adam's apple flinch a moment before Will, as if coming to his senses having tasted his blood on his tongue, drinks desperately from his wound. Brown smiles disbelievingly at first and then breaks into a joyous laugh, tossing the knife aside and helping Will settle his head more comfortably, stroking his hair with his free hand. "Yeah, that's it. Perfect. God, thank you... just don't die, Will. Don't die," he asks, and Grahamson opens his eyes, and they're bright blue, like the sky in the middle of a cloudless July day. Matthew smiles, taking his hand away from his lips as he starts to feel the weakness inside him, keeping them from starting the cycle again. He sighs, smiling. "Hey," Brown strokes his cheek gently, "looks like we were all wrong. The prophecy spoke of another exile. About me" he says, and can read a shadow of worry in his lover's features. "But there is nothing to worry about. I didn't eat you, in case you hadn't noticed."

"Well thank you," Will chuckles weakly, rolling his eyes and licking his lips, exhaling. It's as if he can still hear the melody of a flute somewhere in the distance, and it both alarms and calms him. Matthew's hands touch his hair, prompting the man to find Brown's smile again with his gaze; his light green eyes warm with relief. Will swallows. "Is he dead?"

Brown gently takes his hand, looking at the stone on the ring, then letting Grahamson see it. "Looks like it."

Will nods. He thinks of Chiyoh the last of the Lecter's. He had a feeling she'd join them pretty soon. And then all that would be left of them would be just an estate in the abandoned snow lands and this small house, with a basement full of corpses and rotting human meat.

This place should have been burned down. It could have become a plague, spreading after Will wherever he went now.

He raises his gaze to Matthew.

He has an idea who might be setting it up.

Standing on the beach, holding his fishing rod and looking relaxedly at the float, Will thought about free will. Did any of them have it - Hannibal, Matthew, Will himself? Or was their whole life a game of gods with puppets, marionettes? The warm sea wind flutters his loose blue shirt as he pulls his catch out of the water and takes the fish off the hook, tossing it into a bucket nearby and looking back at their newly built cabin. Matthew lies lazily in his hammock, hidden by the shadows of the large palm leaves from the sun, waiting for Will to come home. Birds eat the grain scattered for them from the steps, and a golden dog runs up, bored, to Brown, beginning to lick his hand. The young man frowns sleepily and tries to wave it away, and this quiet scene brings a soft smile to Grahamson's face. Perhaps matters of free will were not so important. He is where he always wanted to be, and his soul feels a long-awaited peace. He is home. They are home.

He fished in the morning, sometimes feeding the gulls that came to them, and Matthew would finish his sleep in the hammock or lying on the hot sand, letting the warm tide heat his feet. Afterward they usually cooked together, or played with the dog - they had found Winston about a month ago, he was a stray on the outskirts of the nearest kingdom. Grahamson had helped him with potions to get him back on his feet and Matthew had offered to take him with them, which they had done, returning with the necessary items and the dog to their secluded beach. The young man continued to teach him ophelian and often sang to him while their dinner was being prepared or they sat in their house by the fireplace. Nights they lay together in their bed, cuddling, stroking each other's skin and looking out the window at the bright moon and constellations, each time having no trouble finding the Bite of Heiroz among them. The scars as a couple of neat dots on their necks never came off their skin like birthmarks, and they both loved them. Matthew sometimes touched his neck with his fingertips before wrapping his arms around Will's waist from the back and dropping his lips to the scar, gentle, warm and caring in every action. Will touched it himself at times, especially while he listened by the fire or the fireplace to his lyre playing and quiet voice, understanding every word of his songs now. They were serenades.

The song of the bird.

And it would not fall silent.

They were happy.

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